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NOAM CHOMSKY

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Manufacturing dissent

Noam Chomsky and the crisis of the Western Left

by Gareth Morley

A FEW WEEKS AFTER THE ATTACKS ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER, I was in a slightly funky bookstore in Vancouver. It was just at the moment when it was becoming obvious that, despite the fears of our leaders and the hopes of our enemies, no suicide hijackings were going to interfere with North American shopping habits. The bookstore itself confirmed the resilience of consumption: except for the somewhat greater prominence of books on anthrax and Afghanistan, the scene would have been completely indistinguishable from the same store on September 10. As a foot soldier in the battle to maintain aggregate demand, I picked up a book about the Taliban and Central Asian politics, and took my place in the purchase lineup.

A thin young man in a baggy jacket had started a conversation with the hipper-looking clerk about his purchase, a collection

of interviews with Noam Chomsky, containing the great linguist's thoughts about the attacks of the month before.¹ Both were of the view that the United States had brought the attacks upon itself and was planning reprisals against Afghan civilians. I started to turn a little red. As a Canadian, I am opposed to intervening in conversations in shopping lines or on public transit, particularly if to do so would risk provoking controversy. But September 11 was recent enough that I felt a little ashamed of my Canadian scruples. Still, I likely would have

remained silent had the customer not announced. "It must be true if it's in Chomsky," with neither irony in his voice nor opposition from the clerk. I replied in what I like to remember as a sweetly reasonable voice, "Chomsky's an apologist for genocide."²

They looked nonplussed. I told them that Chomsky, in a book still in print, had favourably compared the Khmer Rouge to the French Resistance.³ The clerk gave me the kind of glassy-eyed look typically reserved for insistent adherents of Esperanto or vegetarianism and said, "You certainly seem to know a lot about it, sir." The customer and clerk shared a smile; I paid for my purchase and walked away grumbling, feeling like a complete crank. I was surprised and a little embarrassed at my own vehemence, but reactions to Chomsky do tend toward the passionate.

Even Chomsky's greatest defenders do not claim he has a way with words. One of the century's greatest students of human language, he is nonetheless incomprehensible. As a political writer, he has two rhetorical styles: laboured irony and numbing detail. Many years ago, his publishers realized that transcribed interviews would sell better than the books he actually writes.

Chomsky refuses to talk about himself; he claims he will not watch *Manufacturing Consent*, a 1995 National Film Board of Canada movie about his political ideas, because he does not want to encourage a cult of personality.⁴ More than almost any other political figure, he claims objectivity and factuality: Still, Chomsky inspires intense feelings of aversion or devotion, quite unlike the bored indifference most radical academics can expect.

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There is no denying Chomsky's influence. More than six months after the September 11 attacks, his book on the subject ranks 191st on amazon.com, and he has two other books in the top 2,000 – a result few writers of any kind, and no political writer, can match. *Manufacturing Consent* ranks as among the most viewed documentaries of all time.⁵ Despite his claim that he is ignored by the American media, Chomsky is among its 100 most-cited intellectuals, and some 90 per cent of those citations concern his political rather than linguistic writings.⁶

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An entire network of "alternative" media – ZMagazine, Pacifica Radio, South End Press – repeat his every word, while, as federal judge and legal scholar Richard Posner has shown, more mainstream sources give him considerable attention. Despite his complaints of total marginalization, Chomsky is a major part of the American political scene.

Chomsky has played mentor to three generations of leftists: to the 1968 generation, he was the cool, rational prosecutor of the Cold War; in the 70s, he fiercely denounced anyone with misgivings about the new Communist regimes of Indochina; in the 80s, those of us politicized by the movements against apartheid and American intervention in Central America relied on Chomsky for the kind of argumentation we

could not get from Jello Biafra or *The Clash*.⁷ The Cold War is now over; the generation of 1968 is threatening only in the actuarial sense. *The Clash* has given way to Rage Against the Machine, but Chomsky still sells.

Chomsky remains loyal to 1960s anti-imperialist orthodoxy. During the 90s, when much of the Left was decrying the callous indifference of Western powers to ethnic violence and calling for intervention in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda/Burundi, Sudan and less prominent places, Chomsky argued that the main enemy was, in fact, Western "military humanism." "The emergence of the anti-globalization movement, with its fury at international institutions and its hostility to "Third Way" ideas about using mar-

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kers to further the traditional goals of the Left, demonstrates that these issues remain alive.

Before 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union, the Left had been divided between reformists and revolutionaries. The new division was between those who seek to envelop Western military hegemony and the global market in international, social-democratic institutions and those who see these institutions as themselves the principal vehicle for elite assault on the people of the world. Since September 11, these latter divisions have become increasingly bitter. Chomsky is important as the leading intellectual of the anti-globalization movement, as well as his living link with the Old Left of

the 1930s and the New Left of the 1960s.

Surprisingly, though, Chomsky has had little serious critical attention as a political thinker: There are a number of book-length treatments of Chomsky's political thought by acolytes,⁸ and he has conducted lengthy polemical exchanges with American intellectuals about the Middle East, Central America, and American foreign policy in general. In magazines like *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, Posner has recently collected some of Chomsky's more outrageous statements as evidence of the follies of academics who speak publicly outside their areas of specialization,⁹ but despite the fact that Chomsky puts forward his political views as social science, there have been few attempts to subject his "science" to rigorous criticism.

Chomsky's body of political writing is enormous. His primary political influence has been as a critic of liberal thinking on American foreign policy and of the American media – particularly the quality establishment newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (the latter surprisingly uninterested in popular or visual media). Since his appearance as a political activist during the Vietnam War, Chomsky has argued that the "liberal" media and the "liberal" intelligentsia are really just apologists for American corporate/state power. They "manufacture consent" by limiting the domain of acceptable criticism to instrumental issues of how best to accomplish the objectives of the American ruling class.

Despite his aspirations to social science, Chomsky never considers the methodological problems with his argument. His criticism of the American liberal intelligentsia is essentially an assertion that those who do not share his reductionist Marxist analysis

cannot be "principled" critics of American society. His media criticism assumes that there is a "true" answer, not only to factual questions but also to questions about which facts are important. As social science, his "propaganda model" of the American media suffers from all the problems of structuralist/functionalist accounts of social institutions, problems he fails to seriously engage.

At best, Chomsky is an overzealous prosecutor, capable of marshaling damning facts against the U.S. and its policies, but equally capable of missing a larger part of the moral and political context. At his worst, he is a Manichean ideologue, combining the worst aspects of the Marxist and anarchist traditions. From Marxism, Chomsky has adopted a reductionist economic determinism which refuses to engage with serious economics. As an ostensible anarchist, Chomsky is able to distance himself from the way socialist experiments have turned out in practice; at the same time he has abandoned the anarchist practice of savagely criticizing Leninist dictatorships and has instead become a sophisticated apologist for such dictatorships in Cambodia, Vietnam, Nicaragua and Yugoslavia. In recent years, he has been one of the chief voices on the Left calling for absolute respect for national sovereignty, a position that has aligned him with conservative "realists."

Chomsky and the Left Communist tradition

Chomsky grew up in Philadelphia and was heavily influenced by the Jewish working class culture of New York in the depression. For a bright, secular Jewish kid in Chomsky's circumstances, the question was

not whether to become a socialist but rather which kind. Chomsky chose the anarchist or Left Communist tradition, critical of orthodox Leninism from the Left. He names as youthful inspirations obscure Council Communists like Anton Pannekoek and Hermann Gorter, as well as Alexander Berkman and Rosa Luxemburg. When the Left Communists are remembered at all (other than as target of Lenin's pamphlet, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*), it is as visionaries too devoted to the ideals of socialism and participatory democracy to compete with the pragmatic and ruthless Leninists. Chomsky and his followers portray the Left Communists as true democrats, although he has some difficulty defending them from the criticism that their ideas were utopian and unrealistic. The truth, however, is more complex: The "Lefts" were strong critics of the evolutionary and constitutional tendencies of mainstream social democrats and their objective of spreading the benefits of bourgeois civilization to the working class. To the "Lefts," bourgeois civilization was entirely decadent and required total destruction. As such, they strongly influenced Lenin when he was contemplating attempting a minority-led socialist revolution in undeveloped Russia, long considered a no-no by orthodox Marxists.¹⁰

The Left Communists and similarly minded anarchists like Emma Goldman and Berkman were initially enthusiastic about the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik break with social democratic orthodoxy but the romance soon soured. Almost without exception, the Left Communists, whether Marxist or anarchist, decided that Soviet Russia was fundamentally *astatus quo* power that had abandoned the original vision. Ironically, it was during the greatest atroci-

ties of the Communist movement – the collectivization of the Soviet peasantry in the 1930s, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the enthusiasm for the total transformation of life in Pol Pot's "Democratic Kampuchea" – that the heroic vision, or at least its rhetoric, reappeared, and the heirs of Left Communism drew closer to the official Communist movement.

Since the "Lefts" regarded the Soviet Union as simply another status quo power, they regarded the ideological struggle between fascism, liberal democracy and Communism as so much play-acting, behind which was really the jockeying of traditional colonial powers, understood in Marxist fashion as rooted in economic interests. This point of view could generate genuine in-

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sight: the ideological antagonists were great powers and, in many ways, acted like them. But ironically, given that the Left Communist tradition started as a protest against the economic reductionism of Second International Marxism, this understanding rendered the heirs of Left Communism, including Chomsky, deaf to those aspects of conflict that are not reducible to economic interests: Chomsky has written that Western governments opposed official Communism only because it blocked Western corporations' access to the markets of the countries in which it was in power.¹¹ More recently, Chomsky has found it impossible to take seriously the ethnic dimension of conflict in Yugoslavia or the religious dimension of Al Qaeda's attack on the United States.

Vietnam and the Cold War Left

The Left Communist worldview would have remained a small footnote in the history of the broader Left were it not for the Vietnam War and the related student radicalization of the late 60s. The war raised serious doubts about the possibility of a progressive anti-Communist centred on the Atlantic alliance. At the height of its involvement, the U.S. and its allies had more than 500,000 troops fighting against an insurgency that seemed to have the backing of most of the country's rural population. Even accepting that international legal norms permitted superpowers to intervene militarily on behalf of a sovereign government if invited, the various short-lived governments of South Vietnam did not have sufficient legitimacy to provide the U.S. with a defence to the charge of aggression.

And because the war was against the majority of the population, it could not be fought except by explicitly permitting atrocities. The "rules of engagement" in Vietnam allowed U.S. forces to shell villages without warning if they were subject to gunfire from the village, and to destroy a village after providing warning if the village was considered to "harbour" members of the National Liberation Front – a description that applied to virtually every village in rural Vietnam.¹²

By the late 60s, the war had split and discredited the Cold War liberals and social democrats who had tied anti-totalitarianism to progressive policies and democratic reform at home and abroad. Simultaneously, the hold of old-line Communist parties on the post-war generation weakened. After decades of obscurity and marginalization, the fortunes of left-wing ideological currents

outside orthodox Leninism were suddenly revived. Many of Left Communists themes, including the importance of will and of the direct democracy of workers' councils, re-entered the zeitgeist.

These developments were not without their ironies. The Vietnamese "resistance" was, after all, a "popular front" centred on an orthodox Leninist party, as were the radicals of China and Cuba, both of which had considerable attraction to radicalized Western students. The student movement, therefore, found it difficult to resist repeating the mistakes of earlier generations of Western radicals by becoming apologists for Leninist tyranny. Chomsky, as inheritor of a tradition critical of Leninism, might have helped the student movement, but he fell into the same trap. He directed much of his critical energy into attacking "unprincipled" liberal opponents of the war, he said, opposed it on the grounds of a cost-benefit analysis of American interests, rather than because it was an aggressive war against the people of South Vietnam.

Do Cold War liberals like John Kenneth Galbraith or Hans Morgenthau who turned against the war deserve such criticism? They based their opposition to Communism on a commitment to democratic values and felt no need to deny that it was also in Americans' interests. However, there is nothing inconsistent in the claim that anti-Communism is a noble cause but that a particular war fought in its name is not. Nor is it inconsistent to argue that a particular war is immoral and contrary to national interest.

Neither Chomsky nor the student Left (at least initially) were supporters of Leninism. But the Left Communist assumption that the apparent ideological battle between democratic capitalism and the Soviet bloc

was a sham, along with the Marxist assumption that all real conflict is economic in nature, made it impossible for them to see the anti-Communist progressives as anything but corrupt and cowardly. This bred the self-righteousness common to the young radicals and their middle-aged cheerleaders.

Chomsky did not simply attack the liberal antiwar intellectuals and media but argued that the "doves" served a function – of narrowing the debate about Vietnam to purely instrumental issues. In this way he argued, the Western system of intellectual freedom was far more clever and effective than the Soviet system of censorship. Chomsky, of course, never argued this was the doves' conscious intention, that they were pretending to oppose the war in order to befuddle the masses, but he seemed not to worry about the obvious explanatory gap: how were the liberal intellectuals instructed in the optimal amount of disidence that would best preserve the system without threatening it, if not through their conscious minds?

Despite his argument that the American form of social control did operate through coercion, Chomsky repeatedly claimed for himself the title of "dissident," thus comparing himself to Eastern Europeans who put their freedom and lives at risk, and implicitly painting his less radical American colleagues as cowards. Like many of that era, Chomsky exaggerated the danger to internal civil liberties posed by the Vietnam War. On a number of occasions, he said that he was seriously worried that he, a full professor at MIT, would be sent to jail for "years" for antiwar activity.¹³ While this may have been understandable at the time, it is remarkable that Chomsky has maintained this since. It is also remarkable that he has

repeatedly attacked genuine dissidents, including those associated with the moderate Left, like Václav Havel. When Havel became president of Czechoslovakia and was invited to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, Chomsky could not suppress his venom. In a published letter to Nation columnist Alexander Cockburn, he described Havel as "vastly below the level" of Stalinist hacks, and asserted that Havel was insincere in his praise of American democracy in order to get money for his "relatively rich" country.¹⁴

After the Vietnam War ended, and the passions it had excited began to calm, much of the former student Left began to see the dark side of the regimes that had displaced U.S. colonialism in Southeast Asia. Chomsky used his authority to pronounce anathema on any American leftist who criticized the Hanoi regime, even if the criticisms were true:

Let us assume that credible information is produced indicating that there are severe human rights violations in Vietnam of the sort alleged [by the International League for Human Rights]: thousands of political prisoners, and so on. Then protests are warranted. But some serious questions arise about the proper mode, given the historical record and existing circumstances. Included here are some elementary questions of simple good taste. Speaking personally, I would agree to sign an appropriately worded protest against human rights violations in Vietnam if it were released say, in Sweden, or were presented to the public through some medium that emerged with a shred of honour from the catastrophe of the past years. But for a protest presented to the public through the American mass media, that is quite another matter!¹⁵

Following this reasoning, Chomsky went so far as to denounce efforts to help post-war Vietnamese refugees publicize their fate or settle in Western countries.¹⁶ But the true moral disaster came when he and his collaborator Edward Herman attacked those responsible for an alleged "vast and unprecedented" propaganda campaign of "fabrication" against Democratic Kampuchea. Among those whose integrity Chomsky attacked were Jean Lacouture, on whose testimony Chomsky had previously relied to downplay reports of human rights abuses in postwar Vietnam, and William Shawcross, a bitter critic of Kissinger and Nixon's Cambodian policies.

Chomsky and Herman were well aware that the Khmer Rouge forced every resident of Phnom Penh (many of them recent refugees from Khmer Rouge rule in the countryside) out of the city at gunpoint. By 1979, it should have been clear that at least one million people had died from starvation or summary execution during the Democratic Kampuchean regime. Yet Chomsky and Herman portrayed the Khmer Rouge blandly as a "peasant army" and even attempted to blame the residents of Phnom Penh for their fate:

[I]t becomes a question of some interest whether in Cambodia, for example, a gang of Marxist murderers are systematically engaged in what Lacouture calls "autogenocide" – "the suicide of a people in the name of revolution, worse, in the name of socialism" – or whether the worst atrocities have taken place at the hands of a peasant army, recruited and driven out of their devastated villages by U.S. bombs and then taking revenge against the urban civilization that they regarded,



NOAM CHOMSKY at the University of British Columbia. PHOTOGRAPH BY UNCOLA CLARKS

not without reason, as a collaborator in their destruction and their long history of oppression. [Emphasis added]

Forced collectivization of the countryside by leftist forces predated the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, and, along with American bombing, contributed to a mass exodus to the cities, as well as mass starvation. When Phnom Penh fell, the Khmer Rouge conducted well-documented mass executions, and immediately forced the 3 million residents of the city into rural collective

farms. Pol Pot himself boasted that he had turned the entire country into a "work camp." Democratic Kampuchea was a land of forced marriages, forced labour and summary execution by indoctrinated teenagers. In January 1977, Khmer Rouge forces entered into a disputed border zone and attacked three Thai villages. Pictures of mutilated corpses of women and children were widely published in the Western media, confirming the refugee reports that Chomsky urged be treated with "caution" two years later.¹⁷

In their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent* (reissued with a new introduction in 2002), Chomsky and Herman refer to their earlier discussion of Cambodia in the *Political Economy of Human Rights*: "The conclusions drawn there remain valid. To our knowledge, no error or even misleading statement or omission has ever been found."¹⁸ Neither their comparison of Pol Pot's troops to the French Resistance nor the alleged culpability of the residents of Phnom Penh in their own enslavement and murder are mentioned. At the same time, Chomsky and Herman (rightly) take the United States to task for imposing sanctions on Vietnam for its invasion of Khmer Rouge

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Kampuchea, and, in fact, appear to approve of the Vietnamese invasion – an invasion that can surely only be justified by the genocidal nature of the Pol Pot regime.

The most shameful coda to Chomsky and Herman's writings on Cambodia is the film *Manufacturing Consent*. At one point, the directors show Cambodian demonstrators protesting a visit by Chomsky to the University of Toronto. One of the protesters explains that Chomsky denied the genocide in Cambodia. The directors cut to Chomsky saying in a calm, professorial voice, "I don't mind the attacks. I just mind the lies." The film gives its viewers the impression that Chomsky never minimized the Cambodian genocide itself, but only compared coverage of Cambodia to that of East Timor. Of

course, Chomsky cannot personally be held responsible for the film's distortions, since he claims he has never seen it.

The propaganda model

The radicalization of the 60s aroused great hopes and created a permanent leftist counterculture in large North American cities, quite different from the tiny radical circles of the 1950s. It also produced two mass movements – environmentalism and feminism – that changed the nature of the reformist agenda in the West. But the revolutionary expectations of the 1968 generation were brought down to hard reality: when the revolt against "bureaucratic state capitalism" and "managerial liberalism" came, its leaders were not Tom Hayden or Herbert Marcuse, but Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

Most politicians react to political failure by blaming the communications strategy. Not surprisingly, the Marxist tradition has similar methods of avoiding fundamental rethinking.

Marxism has long held that the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of its ruling class. In orthodox Marxism, "ideology" perfectly mirrors the interests of the masses, but is widely accepted by those who should be following the Marxists, who alone have access to the "scientific" reality of history. Immense epistemological and political problems arise, however. If ideology is purely structural, how is the Marxist able to transcend it? If it is instrumental, how can we continue to believe that the easily ensnared masses are up to the historical task Marxism has set for them?

Some of the New Left thinkers tried seriously to grapple with these issues.

Chomsky with Herman, proposed a "propaganda model" of the media as a serious contribution to social science. Indeed as "one of the best confirmed theses in the social sciences."¹⁹ The propaganda model is really just the Marxist theory of ideology applied to the mass media. The media serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity.²⁰ It is clear that Chomsky attributes the absence of a mass Left in the United States, and the left's decline internationally, to the media.²¹

Chomsky and Herman demonstrate the propaganda model by comparing the reporting of atrocities in anti-American and pro-American countries in the elite American media, with a view to showing that the former are more widely publicized than the latter. One difficulty, of course, is that there is no objective measure of how "important" an atrocity is. Moreover, when Chomsky finds that Israeli mistreatment of protesters receives more coverage than similar (or much worse) events in sub-Saharan Africa, he argues that this is no more surprising than a Boston newspaper giving more attention to municipal scandals in Boston than in Seattle.²² Perhaps, but this calls into question the "empirical" nature of the inquiry. Nor does Chomsky deal with theoretical objections to his "propaganda model." He is clear that his is not a conspiracy theory; there is no committee of the ruling class vetting the news. Instead, it is a "structural-functional" mode of explanation. The prevalence of debate and apparent dissent is in fact functional for the health of the system as a whole, since it establishes the contours of allowable thinking. But Chomsky seems unaware of the debate in social science about the acceptability of

such explanations without some story about how the system is able to maintain the functionality of its subcomponents. In evolutionary theory, such a story exists in the form of natural selection. Similar stories exist to explain why firms in competitive markets match marginal revenue to marginal cost. But Chomsky is uninterested in explaining how the ruling class is able to ensure just the right amount of dissent to legitimize the system while not letting it get out of hand.

Chomsky and Herman point to Indonesian atrocities in East Timor as having received less attention than the genocide in Cambodia. This argument has some legitimacy and Chomsky has done a considerable amount of good in publicizing East Timor's plight. He has argued persuasively that the U.S., Canada and Australia were complicit in the illegal occupation of East Timor. However, legitimate as these political arguments are, they do not demonstrate a campaign to suppress information about East Timor in the Western media. The New York Times did, in fact, denounce the invasion of East Timor, as well as America's role,²³ but in general, unfortunately, there is little public interest in distant massacres unless they relate to current controversies. Chomsky himself has expressed a lack of interest in atrocities – including the 1994 massacre of Tutsis in Rwanda – that do not reflect on American power one way or the other.²⁴

There is no question that the "News That Fit to Print" reflects some mixture of the preoccupations of the readers, journalists, owners and advertisers of a newspaper. If the market were fully competitive, it would reflect the readers' biases; because it is not, owners are able to impose their own

biases to some degree. The standards of journalism, if followed, can reduce the chance of factual inaccuracy, but they will not be able to determine what is worth reporting. What is "important" is inherently a matter of political judgement.

Chomsky also greatly exaggerates the effect of media on public opinion. As Canadians well know, millionaires can invest enormous sums of money to create ideologically sympathetic media, all with little effect. For all Conrad Black's efforts, Canadians continue to support a redistributionist welfare state; for all Izzy Aspero, they tend to neutrality in the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is easy to concede that the me-

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dia influence how people think, but people tend to gravitate to those media that reflect their ideological preconceptions. The weakness of leftist media in America (in contrast to Europe and to a lesser extent Canada) is the weakness of the Left, and the marginalization of the socialist Left in the American media is no greater than its marginalization in America as a whole. Indeed, if Posner's list of most-cited public intellectuals accurately reflected the American population, Ralph Nader would have run a strong second to Gore in the 2000 election.

The problem with Chomsky's media criticism is that it tends to create a self-perpetuating spiral of marginalization. A Left that considers that its trouble relating to ordinary people might be its own fault, and

therefore within its own control, can rebound – if it thinks its priorities and policies. A Left convinced that it has access to truths kept hidden from the rest of the population by structural forces will inevitably be tempted to undemocratic tactics to break through the indoctrination of the masses. The 20th century record of this kind of politics is horrifying; its 21st century prospects do not look much better.

Post-Cold War dilemmas of the Left

Chomsky was as disoriented by the end of the Cold War as anyone else. Most damaging was Nicaragua's overwhelming rejection of the Sandinistas in the elections of 1990. Chomsky has called "totalitarians" those who suggest that the election results accurately reflected Nicaraguans' preferences after 10 years of disastrous economic policies. Chomsky has long argued that centrally planned economies are no less efficient than capitalist ones,²⁵ and, following Lenin, that democracy is incompatible with capitalism in the semi-colonial periphery. But immediately after 1990, large numbers of formerly socialist movements, most dramatically South Africa's ANC, simultaneously embraced multiparty democracy and market economics. The Soviet Union's economic collapse, combined with the rapid growth of the East Asian market economies, convinced many that a combination of hard money, free markets and constitutional democracy was a magic ticket to prosperity.

Ten years later, there is no doubt that many of these hopes were disappointed. Free movement of capital can be a recipe for financial crisis. Many countries trying to follow the wisdom of the Washington Consen-

sus paid an enormous price in "short-term" pain, but have yet to experience the promised shadow. While Latin America came out of the 80s, there has been backsliding since. East Asia has not fully recovered from the crises of 1997. Africa is overwhelmed with the scourge of AIDS. Communism has been replaced by equally totalitarian and militant forms of nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

It is difficult to get perspective on an era while living in it, but in the longer view, and with all the caveats, 1989 to 1991 still appears miraculous. But Chomsky did not use the Soviet collapse to rethink his worldview. Instead, he became a central figure in an intra-Left debate about military intervention to prevent the massacre of ethnic populations. The test case was the former Yugoslavia. Refugees from "Greater Serbia" were a constant reminder of what was going on in the middle of Europe. Candidate Clinton was critical of the Bush administration for doing nothing, but President Clinton, impressed by the backlash after the death of American troops during a "humanitarian" mission in Somalia and by a "realist" book by Robert Kaplan, was inclined to leave the Balkans to their "ancient hatreds." Yugoslavia was left to a racist construction as the "heart of darkness," and it appeared that mainstream opinion did not care enough to act.

While some on the International Left were calling for Western militaries to end ethnic cleansing and bring its perpetrators to justice, Chomsky came out strongly against. To some extent, he did so by minimizing the awfulness of Serbian inhumanity. He never went as far as Edward Herman, who praised Milosevic's Serbia as "social-

ist," but, in an eerie repetition of their writing on Cambodia, Chomsky portrayed the Serbian militias as sympathetic peasants:

Yeah, sure, we all were opposed to what was happening in Sarajevo – but what do you propose to do about it? Kill the Serbs? They're human beings too, you know, and it's not like the position of these Serb peasants up in the hills is zero. I mean, maybe their lifestyles aren't as much like ours as those nice Europeans in Sarajevo, but they're people too. In fact, I should say that there's been a lot of class bias in general in the Western reactions to what's been going on there, and in the media coverage in particular.²⁶

Of course, leftist proponents of intervention were not advocating killing "the Serbs," but rather a military commitment to multi-ethnic Bosnia, or at least the removal of the arms embargo against it. Nonetheless, there is a defensible anti-intervention position: as the classic tradition emphasizes, having good intentions is only a necessary condition for a just war; there must be a reasonable prospect of success and proportionality between the ends sought and the terrible methods of war.

But Chomsky's arguments degenerated into a Manichean picture of the West in general and the U.S. in particular. Failure to act elsewhere was held up as hypocrisy; demands for action as arrogance and imperialism. The argument from hypocrisy is transparently bad, since a failure to do the right thing in one case cannot justify a failure to do the right thing in another, similarly, it may not be possible to prevent all massacres, which of course cannot justify standing by when they are preventable. True to the Left Communist tradition, Chomsky

identifies imperialism not as a policy that can be changed, but as a permanent reality of capitalist states. This, of course, goes beyond anything that Chomsky's empiricism can establish.

When the West finally opposed Serbian irredentism in Kosovo in 1999 (influenced by recently elected social democratic and Green leaders who, as Paul Berman has shown, had been active in the 60s student movement),²⁷ Chomsky, finding himself on the same side as Henry Kissinger, denounced the intervention as an infringement of the sacred principle of national sovereignty. Disturbingly, he wrote that those on the Left who supported the aerial cam-

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aign against Serbia should, to be consistent, join Osama bin Laden's network and bomb London or New York.²⁸

More influential than Chomsky's denunciation of NATO's actions in Kosovo have been his writings on globalization. The argument that being "competitive" in global markets requires reduced social spending and deregulation has traditionally been used by conservative governments trying to justify unpopular measures; it has little respectability as economic theory. However, it has had the effect of associating international trade with American-style neoliberalism, and has generated a left-wing counter-movement.

Left-wing anti-globalization can be divided into three camps: first, NGOs that are not really opposed to globalization but want

international trade agreements to include more effective legal protections for human rights, labour rights and the environment;²⁹ second, unions advocating traditional protectionism; and third, an explicitly anarchist movement that identifies "globalization" with capitalism itself. Chomsky has heavily influenced this last group, which sees the global market as an instrument for transferring wealth from the poorest countries to the richest. The fact that the poorest countries are precisely those most outside the global marketplace is ignored, although Chomsky is perhaps unusual in specifically denying it.

During the Cold War, these ideas – in the form of "dependency theory" – had encouraged the first generation of leaders of the newly independent colonies, and their colleagues in Latin America, to build statist autarkies. Not surprisingly, these proved remarkably inefficient and, despite many disappointments on the road to the "Washington Consensus," few in the developing world advocate repeating the strategy; they are even less inclined to support First World protectionism. However, Chomsky's authority helps activists avoid facing these problems.

All these themes have surfaced in Chomsky's response to the September 11 attacks, a response that has been surprisingly influential. Chomsky did not, of course, support the attacks; indeed, he seemed more aware than many of the reactionary nature of Al Qaeda's goals. His influential comment was that the attacks were significant not because of their violence but because, for the first time, the "guns are directed the other way."³⁰ But after Bush's ultimatum to the Taliban, Chomsky ratcheted up the rhetoric. He declared that "millions" would die, and that Afghanistan was suffer-

ing a "silent genocide."³¹ Chomsky denied any moral difference between accidental and deliberate killing. He was quick to condemn those on the Left unwilling to denounce the Coalition war, going so far as to tar his recent collaborator Christopher Hitchens with the brush of "racism."³² In the event, the people of Afghanistan welcomed liberation from a fundamentalist tyranny which was, for them, also a foreign occupation. It is hard now to deny that the allied intervention saved Afghan lives.

Chomsky and the crisis of the Left

The future of the anti-globalization movement after September 11 is unclear. It seems likely to degenerate into further irrelevance and sectarianism, to a large degree because of the pathologies that have been Chomsky's legacy to the Left.

If absence from the media does not explain the Left's weakness, it is possible that a belief in this explanation does, at least in part. Based on a curiously uncritical use of opinion polls,³³ Chomsky tells the North American Left that it really represents a large majority of people. This ensures that the movement will further isolate itself. Radical movements can survive being in a minority, but they make serious tactical mistakes if they do not realize that they are a minority. The Nader presidential campaign is an obvious example, as is the determination of anti-globalization protesters to physically shut down all meetings of international leaders.

SINCE 1989, THOSE WHO HAVE TRIED TO transform the Left into a market-friendly force closely connected to voters' concerns about crime, public services and fiscal responsibility have achieved much. At the

same time, these proponents of the "Third Way" have grown complacent about those who seek to enact apocalyptic battles with evil corporations as a part of a redemptive and eschatological vision of politics. Where are the progressive voices that oppose the essentially nihilistic vision of Chomsky and his co-thinkers?

Earlier generations of social democrats had to maintain constant vigilance against undemocratic revolutionary forces seeking to take over their institutions. During the 90s this kind of vigilance seemed anachronistic and ridiculous, like a newsreel about protecting oneself from atomic war. But the rise of a movement that defines "democracy" as the absolute right to disrupt any international meeting of elected officials and is prepared to support even far-right, anti-democratic forces – as long as they are in conflict with NATO – has changed all this. The moderate Left needs to find its voice on these issues. It cannot be afraid of speaking out against antidemocratic extremists.

In the good old days, some badly dressed CP hack, denuding orthodox Leninism from its critics, would point out that these tactics were "substitutionist" and "petty bourgeois adventurism." The Leninists are now gone, but the infantile disorder remains. ■

NOTES

- 1 N. Chomsky, 9-11 (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001)
- 2 N. Chomsky & E. Herman *After the Catastrophe: The Political Economy of Human Rights*, Vol. 2 (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1979), p. 150.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 4 Ed. P. Mitchell & J. Schofield, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York: The New Press, 2001), p. 318.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 318.

6 R. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001)

7 Jelic, Biala was the lead singer of a 1980s punk rock group called the Dead Kennedys, whose lyrics reflected the anarchist politics generally popular among punks. The Clash was a more talented British group with Marxist sympathies.

8 M. Ral, *Chomsky's Politics* (London: Verso, 1995); P. Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature* (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1997); A. Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

9 R. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline* (2001), p. 86.

10 V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970), pp. 134-140.

11 N. Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (London: Random House, 1987), p. 230.

12 M. Walzer, *Just and Urgent Wars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 189.

13 *Invenire*, cited in M. Ral, *Chomsky's Politics* (1995)

14 Reprinted in A. Cockburn, *The Golden Age Is In Us* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 149-151.

15 N. Chomsky, *Radical Priorities*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981), p. 66.

16 See, for instance, N. Chomsky, *Perspectives on Power* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997), p. 64.

17 W. Shawcross, "The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience" (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

18 N. Chomsky & E. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), pp. 281-282.

19 N. Chomsky, *Understanding Power* (2001), p. 18.

20 *Manufacturing Consent* (2001), p. ix

21 Chomsky repeatedly says that the Western media are a more effective propaganda tool than were the Soviet or fascist media; see *Understanding Power* (2001), p. 13.

22 N. Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 152.

23 *Grudgeling* related in N. Chomsky, *Perspectives on Power* (1997), pp. 175-176.

24 N. Chomsky, *Understanding Power* (2001), p. 171.

25 Chomsky goes so far as to argue that the reason the First World is wealthier than the Third World is that the Third World had free markets forced upon it (*Ibid.*, p. 104). This is so far from reality that it is hardly necessary to try to refute it.

26 *Understanding Power*, p. 171.

27 P. Berman, "The Passion of Joschka Fischer," *New Republic* (August 27, 2001)

28 N. Chomsky, *A New Generation Draws the Line: Kosovo, East Timor and the Standards of the West* (1999), p. 39.

29 This tendency has been brilliantly exemplified by Oxfam's report on global trade, available at www.marketedata.org that argues for ending global poverty through enhanced trade.

30 N. Chomsky, 9-11 (2001), p. 12

31 E. Ried, "A silent genocide," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* No. 559 (8-14 November 2001), available at www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2001/559/8wari1.htm

32 Reply to Hitchens', *The Nation* (October 1, 2001). The context was Hitchens' denial that Clinton's bombing of a Sudanese factory allegedly being used to make chemical weapons in 1998 was comparable as an atrocity to September 11. Interestingly, Hitchens had written a great deal attacking the US bombing.

33 For an example, see N. Chomsky, *Perspectives on Power* (1997), p. 224.

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