

Who Rules the World?

Review by Tony Sheather

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Noam Chomsky: "Who Rules the World?" Penguin Random Press, 2017

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When I was at Queensland University in the late 1960's and early 70's, I was a member of a Christian pacifist group opposing the Vietnam War. I may have perused the daily book stall of the "radicals" and was vaguely aware of Noam Chomsky's "American Power and The Four Mandarins". However, even when heavily involved as an atheist in the anarchist politics during the mid-70's to early 80's consuming the likes of Bakunin, Berkman, Goldman, Cardan, Dolgoff and Bookchin, I never delved into Chomsky's work.

Where Chomsky became the public intellectual of future decades, I found nourishment, in the 70's but particularly in later even more challenging personal times, in reading Bookchin's many writings urging and depicting in erudite detail a society transformed: volumes such as *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, *The Spanish Anarchists*, *Towards an Ecological Society*, *The Ecology of Freedom*, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, *Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left*, the four volume *The Third Revolution*.

In recent years with retirement looming then a reality, I have explored a number of Noam Chomsky's more current writings *Interventions*, *What We Say Goes*, *Perilous Power*, *Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy* (with Marxist Gilbert Achcar). I have just finished reading his 2016 book *Who Rules the World?*

As always his analysis is reasoned and incisive, his citation of sources potent and meticulous. He highlights with urgency the twin threats to humanity: nuclear holocaust and climate change. His revelations of the U.S. posturing in the near-cataclysm of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is chilling. The insanity of subsequent Presidential administrations, Democrat as much as Republican, in twisting the tail of the tiger is graphically depicted. One expected megalomania in different guise from the Bush family and Reagan but the Clinton Doctrine enshrined in the 1995 STRATCOM study "Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence" affirming the US right to initiate nuclear conflict even against non-nuclear states, is even more redolent of Doctor Strangelove when one reads:

"That the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project" (186).

The contradiction between liberal demeanour and harsh pragmatism is further portrayed: “Then came Barack Obama with pleasant words about working to abolish nuclear weapons - combined with plans to spend \$1 trillion on the nuclear arsenal over the next thirty years.” (186-7)

Long time anti-nuclear campaigner, here editor, Australian-born Helen Caldicott introduces her study of nuclear weapons today with the words “...the real terrorists of the world today are the United States and Russia.” (*Sleepwalking to Armageddon-The Threat of Nuclear Annihilation*, 2017). She discusses the even more chilling risk posed by Trump’s sociopathic tendencies since his ascension, citing Trump biographer Tony Schwartz prior to the presidential election: “I genuinely believe that if Trump wins and gets the nuclear codes there is an excellent chance it will lead to the end of civilisation.” (Intro., ix) Of limited consolation is Caldicott’s reference to Hillary Clinton’s participation in pre-presidential election debates with Republican candidates “overtly discussing the notion of bombing countries such as Syria, Iran, Yemen, and others. And all of them have discussed the use of nuclear weapons.” We also read “more recently, Hillary Clinton has been a recipient of a huge amount of money from the military- industrial complex.” (Intro. x-xi)

Caldicott hammers home Chomsky’s urgency with a perusal of the fragile process that could begin a conflagration. She reinforces her argument with description of the ninety- two young missile officers “programmed like Pavlovian dogs to initiate nuclear war” who were charged with offences including taking drugs or sleeping in the missile silos. (Intro. xv)

Noam Chomsky is a notable contributor to this collection of essays published in 2017 although Trump himself is not mentioned in his paper. Of sufficient concern is the portrait of popular disenfranchisement that the writer paints. That this extends even to the Fourth Estate is disturbingly evident in Chomsky’s quote from a featured article in America’s supposedly liberal/left press: “Where others push their national interests, the U.S. tries to advance universal principles” (*New York Review of Books*, March 15, 2015; *Sleepwalking to Armageddon*, 2017, 90-91)

Returning to *Who Rules the World?*, the ever-increasing disparity in wealth and power between the very rich (1%, in essence 0.1%) and the majority of the U.S. populace is described in the essay most reflective of the writer’s insights into the history of class-conflict in the States, his support for the beleaguered labor movement. (Chap.12: “Nothing for Other People”: Class Warfare in the United States.”) Chomsky avers that “(i)n the past decade, 95% of growth has gone into the pockets of 1% of the population-mostly a fraction of these.” (145)

Unsurprisingly, the increasing control of the major corporations over the state institutions and both political parties, particularly the Republicans, in the charade of electoral integrity, continues apace. He describes in an earlier essay the “auctioning off (of) congressional leadership positions ... (Hence) the legislators who fund the party get the posts, virtually compelling them to become servants of capital even beyond the norm.” (64) The growth of financialization, off-shore production and deregulation witness the plutonomy garner huge profits and the “global precariat” watch as reliable employment, education, health care and the environment suffer. (Chap.5 “American Decline: Causes and Consequences”).

The book is written just before Trump’s assumption-he is briefly mentioned as a leading republican candidate-but this “reality” confirms in the most repulsive manner the proof of Chomsky’s observations. It also evidences the incongruity of desperate and alienated people reaching out to a man of obscene wealth and negligible principle because he offers populist appeal-“to drain the swamp” in Washington, to build a wall against Mexico, a “wall” against China and NATO, destroy North Korea, consummate the repatriation of difference, repudiate the citizens of selected

countries of Moslem persuasion. A man of bluster and narcissism, a caricature of the American extrovert.

Much of Chomsky's attention over the years has been directed at the Middle East, particularly the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians since the Western powers created a new nation for Holocaust survivors after World War 11. *Who Rules the World?* is no exception, with incisive studies of the trauma faced daily by the people of the West Bank and Gaza and of the distortion in the Western press painting the oppressed as the terrorists. The vicious actions of the Israeli army against the Palestinian people are only matched by the vicious rhetoric of the succession of Israeli leaders, notably Begin's contemptuous "two-headed beasts", Yitzhak Shamir's vile "(They are) like grasshoppers compared to us" whose heads should be "smashed against the boulders and walls" (24).

Chomsky, of course, has faced denunciation for his "unpatriotic" portrayals, particularly given the enormous influence of the U.S. Zionist lobby and his own status as a Jewish man. Hence, the courage of the author. Chomsky devotes five chapters to this torment in the Middle East (as well as a chapter on the risible threat of Iran) and the chapter titles are illustrative: "Terrorists Wanted the World over"; "The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences"; "Israel-Palestine: The Real Options"; "Outrage"; "Cease-fires in which Violations Never Cease" (*Who Rules the World? 2017*).

Another frequent focus of Chomsky's attention, profoundly relevant to the nuclear holocaust he sees as increasingly likely in the mad press and scramble of the superpowers, is the near catastrophe of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. "The Week the World Stood Still" is a graphic depiction of the period. I still recall the nuns at St. Joseph's Primary School in Brisbane urging us to pray. Even to our young minds, oblivious to the nature of the crisis, the sense of impending doom was inscribed forever. No doubt a foreboding the world over. What we did not know until years later was the "extreme prejudice" of the analysis. Here, Chomsky strips bare the machinations and reckless intentions of politicians in the Kennedy administration and the rogue contempt for officialdom of the military. He also offers scathing critique in two later chapters: "The U.S. a Leading Terrorist State" and "Obama's Historic Move."

Chomsky's critiques are established against the background of an anarcho-syndicalist conviction. He is too modest in stating "...I don't really regard myself as an anarchist thinker. I'm a derivative fellow-traveller, let's say." (*Chomsky on Anarchism*, 2005, 135). It is true his philosophical orientation is often understated in his numerous publications. Nonetheless, his anarchism deserves reflection.

One of the most challenging demands of any humanist philosophy is the assumption that human beings want to be liberated and are capable of such. After all, human flaws are everywhere apparent. Noam Chomsky is inspiring in his response to a query positing the necessity of "fundamental change in the nature of man" if libertarian socialism or anarchism is to be realised:

"I think it not only depends on it but in fact the whole purpose of libertarian socialism is that it will contribute to it. It will contribute to a spiritual transformation-precisely that kind of great transformation in the way human beings conceive of themselves and their ability to act, to decide, to create, to produce, to enquire-precisely that spiritual transformation that (radical) social thinkers...have always emphasized." (147)

This response in 1976 to such a question would remain in essence today. For some the question will still be troubling. Can dramatic personal change inspire, usher in, or accompany fundamental social revolution? Chomsky's persistence with his belief in such transformation is either credit

to a great human being, credible idealism or the delusion fostered by academic privilege. That the vast majority of those committed to the libertarian cause are/were working-class people does, nonetheless, afford hope that the “delusion” contains broader substance.

A further criticism of the writer is indicated in this socio-philosophical collection of essays and interviews. He maintains belief in the defensive role of the state in preserving reform. Many anarchists would be bemused by his observation that “protecting the state sector today is a step towards abolishing the state.” (10, 213). He sees the state as still offering a “public arena” to stimulate change and protect reforms, often votes in local elections and would consider voting for Ralph Nader or the Green Party (241). Although he perceives “perfect sense” in using the state “to resist exploitation, oppression, domination, violence” while developing viable alternatives, some might see such compromise as the fruit of good fortune:

“(L) et’s take a look at this place MIT. It has been a very good place for me to work; I’ve been able to do things I want to do. I have been here for fifty years and never thought about leaving it.”

Some readers may be further disconcerted by Chomsky’s contention that aspects of MIT are “hopelessly illegitimate. For example, it is a core part of the military-linked industrial economy” as well as his conclusion “So you work within it and try to change it.” (239)

With Barry Pateman in the introduction we might say:

“It is a position that will spark debate, and in the eyes of some, question his whole conception of anarchism.” (*Chomsky on Anarchism*, 10)

Another arena where Noam Chomsky’s writings see contention is in his alleged “favouritism” towards Russia and also China in contrast with the United States. To afford these superpowers greater sympathy as the historical victims of Western expansion, invasion or exploitation is perfectly understandable. Surely, however, a libertarian socialist should scrutinise the evils of internal repression and the perversions of state socialism? Chomsky’s answer is to say that this is the role of those countries’ scribes. Within the “open society” he applauds and from which he benefits, it is seemingly an easier task.

“As in the case of China (in the South China Sea) one does not have to regard Putin’s moves and motives favourably to understand the logic behind them.” (244) This logic is defined as NATO’s endeavour to move the Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and “integrate it into the West” an action perceived by Putin “as a direct threat to Russia’s interests.” (John Mearsheimer, *Foreign Affairs* 93, no.5., 2014). In this world of realpolitik where is the courageous legacy of the Spanish anarchists and the Makhnovist movement?

It is also instructive to witness Chomsky’s praise for Cuba’s revolutionary inspiration in Latin America. (106-107) Any spur to oppose the “murderous assaults” of U.S. imperialism and its lackeys is to be lauded, but it would be appropriate to see criticism of the authoritarian nature of Castro’s post-coup rule perceived by one anarcho- syndicalist in the reflections of another. Sam Dolgoff’s *The Cuban Revolution-a Critical Perspective* is as pertinent today as when first penned in 1976.

Dolgoff scrutinises the writings of libertarian Waldo Frank, liberal New York Times journalist Herbert Matthews and Marxist-Leninist writer Adolfo Gilly. All are cited praising the Cuban revolution but inadvertently including dramatically contradictory commentary. “Castro is no dictator” but “there always comes a time, when leaders must dare, for the people’s sake, to oppose the people.” (Waldo Frank, *The Prophetic Island* ,1961, quoted in Sam Dolgoff, 6).

One of the greatest strengths of the man often described as the world's greatest public intellectual is his impeccable scrutiny of the daily press. We see this most explicitly in this anthology of his essays in the chapter entitled "One Day in the Life of a reader of the New York Times". With reference to a distorted article in another leading magazine Chomsky observes with tongue firmly in cheek: "It is refreshing to see the commitment of the Times to the integrity of journalism." He does describe the paper as "an indispensable source of news and commentary" but also one which daily "provide(s) ...insights into prevailing ideology and intellectual culture." (213)

The final paragraph of this lucid, informative and inspiring work does continue the twisting threads of paradox. Chomsky accurately describes the disenfranchisement of the great majority of people in the U.S., where public opinion is scorned by the elites and the electoral process verges on the farcical. Is it conceivable or likely that these same "citizens of the rich and powerful states ...enjoy an unusual legacy of freedom, privilege and opportunity"? Is it possible that these citizens will be able to optimistically and fruitfully "respond to challenges of great human import" within the parameters and limitations of state and corporate structures? (258) Time without nuclear or climatic oblivion will tell.

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