

# Discerning the patterns of world order: Noam Chomsky and international theory after the Cold War

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**Abstract.** In this article I argue that Chomsky's political writings, widely ignored in the discipline, are a significant resource for thinking about contemporary world politics, how we should analyse it, and to what ends. This claim is defended through an analysis of recent efforts by IR scholars to interpret the post-Cold War order. When viewed through the analytic perspective articulated by Chomsky, disciplinary accounts of the post-Cold War world as liberal and peaceful are shown to be insufficiently attentive to the empirical record. Chomsky's political writings are also shown to be compatible with standard accounts of critical social science.

How useful is the work of Noam Chomsky for understanding contemporary world politics? It depends who you ask. For the thousands of people around the world who attend his lectures and buy his books, Chomsky is a popular and respected guide to making sense of complex international realities.<sup>1</sup> For almost four decades, he has been in constant demand from diverse audiences, in the United States and elsewhere, as a speaker on world politics in general and US foreign policy in particular. Chomsky's numerous books, on topics ranging from the Vietnam war, the political economy of human rights, terrorism, and the mass media, to humanitarian intervention, and neoliberal globalisation, amongst others, sell in large numbers. In the twelve months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001, a collection of Chomsky's interviews, entitled *9–11*, sold well over 200,000 copies and had been translated into 19 languages.<sup>2</sup> Chomsky is emeritus Institute Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT, and widely regarded as the author of an intellectual revolution in linguistics. World politics is his avocation, rendering Chomsky's record of achievement all the more remarkable.

Not everyone sees Chomsky in such a positive light. Internationally, he is a much sought-after expert contributor to media coverage of world affairs. In the United

\* Thanks to Eric Herring, Jutta Weldes, Kathryn Dean, Tarak Barkawi, John Game and Noam Chomsky for comments, suggestions and corrections.

<sup>1</sup> See Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Milan Rai, *Chomsky's Politics* (London: Verso, 1995); and Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel (eds.) *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York: The New Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Noam Chomsky, *9–11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001). Thanks to Greg Ruggiero for sales figures.

States, in contrast, Chomsky has long been almost entirely excluded from the mass media. The undeniable success of *9–11* prompted a rare appearance for Chomsky on network television. William Bennett, Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation and Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, attacked and badly misrepresented the book on CNN. The network, under pressure from Chomsky's publisher and others, subsequently agreed to a live debate between the two. Bennett, author of his own book about 11 September, again misrepresented *9–11*'s contents, accused Chomsky of 'false and treacherous teaching', and described him as a man 'who has made a career out of hating America and out of trashing the record of this country'.<sup>3</sup> Nor was this an isolated attack. Chomsky was also criticised for his view of 9/11 from the US left, by Christopher Hitchens and Eric Altermann amongst others. As Paul Robinson charged in *The New York Times* in 1979, 'Noam Chomsky is arguably the most important intellectual alive today'. But his political writings are 'maddeningly simple-minded', reducing US foreign policy to only one factor, 'the needs of American capitalism . . .'.<sup>4</sup>

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), the picture is strikingly similar. Despite Chomsky's international prominence and the rigorous quality of his research,<sup>5</sup> reference to his work in the IR literature is rare, and seldom flattering. Serious treatments of his work by IR scholars are few.<sup>6</sup> Even among those whose work is broadly sympathetic, substantively or politically, to his arguments, Chomsky's writings are regularly dubbed 'radical'<sup>7</sup> or 'polemical'.<sup>8</sup> The failure to engage with his work is revealing of the politics of the discipline. Most often, Chomsky is marginalised or dismissed less for intellectual reasons than for political ones. When sharing platforms with 'official' IR scholars, for example, Chomsky's lack of formal credentials in the field is frequently noted, often with ridicule. His arguments and the substance of his research, meanwhile, are sidelined or ignored. Notably, it is only in political science and related fields that Chomsky has had this experience.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I side with the many who take Chomsky seriously against the few who don't. Chomsky's political writings are a significant resource for thinking about contemporary world politics, how we should analyse it, and to what ends. As such,

<sup>3</sup> *American Morning* with Paula Zahn. Interview with Noam Chomsky, Bill Bennett, 30 May 2002. Online at <[www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0205/30/Itm.01.html](http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0205/30/Itm.01.html)>

<sup>4</sup> 'The Chomsky Problem,' *New York Times Book Review*, 25 February 1979, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Christopher Hitchens, 'The chorus and Cassandra: what everyone knows about Noam Chomsky', in Carlos P. Otero (ed.) *Noam Chomsky: Critical Assessments*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 401–21.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Falk, 'Letter from Prison – American style: the political vision and practice of Noam Chomsky', in Otero, *Noam Chomsky: Critical Assessments*, vol.2, pp. 578–97; and Christopher Coker, 'The Mandarin and the Commissar: The Political Thought of Noam Chomsky', in Otero, vol. 2, pp. 473–85.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Cox refers to Chomsky as 'the radical critic' and 'The most influential radical writer on American foreign relations...'; see 'Whatever Happened to American Decline? International Relations and the New United States Hegemony', *New Political Economy*, 6 (2001), p. 312 and n.16, p. 335.

<sup>8</sup> David Campbell refers to 'Chomsky's polemics (valuable though they are)'; see *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Alison Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 182–3. Such experiences help to explain Chomsky's view of the social sciences, which I discuss below. A lack of professional credentials has not prevented him being taken seriously in other fields outside linguistics, such as mathematics. (Personal communication.)

they raise a number of questions for IR as a discipline. I defend these claims through an analysis, from the vantage point provided by Chomsky's work, of recent efforts by IR scholars to come to grips with the contemporary world order. The past decade has seen considerable ferment in IR, as it seeks to adjust to putatively new international realities. Taking for granted that the collapse of the Soviet Union signalled a major transformation in world politics, IR scholars have sought to trace out the nature and extent of those changes in order to update or remake models and theories. But as Doug Stokes demonstrates in his analysis of US security policy in Columbia,<sup>10</sup> there are strong empirical grounds for endorsing Chomsky's claim for major continuities in world politics despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other scholars have also made continuity arguments.<sup>11</sup> Chomsky offers a distinctive – and immensely popular – explanation for these persistent patterns, both in US foreign policy and in world order more generally. Amidst widespread liberal triumphalism, his work is an important aid to 'intellectual self-defense'<sup>12</sup> against the many shibboleths of our time.

I develop my argument in the following way. First, I consider recent efforts by IR scholars to characterise the present, post-Cold War world order and identify two accounts of it. When viewed through the analytic perspective articulated by Chomsky, which I do in the second part of the article, dominant disciplinary accounts emerge as insufficiently attentive to the empirical record. As a result, their descriptions of the contemporary world order and its defining traits, as well as the theories they build on these descriptions, are deeply problematic. Third, I examine Chomsky's relations with IR and IR theory and show his work to be critical social science.

## IR and world order after the Cold War

In the past decade, competing accounts of world politics have proliferated against the backdrop of a world whose defining characteristics seem increasingly opaque.<sup>13</sup> In considering these different efforts to map our world, it is worth asking at the outset if, despite the many disagreements, there are any shared facts. What do we as a discipline know? Broadly speaking, there are perhaps four or five empirical claims about the contemporary world on which most IR scholars would agree.<sup>14</sup>

First, the Cold War is over, and the United States won. Because the Cold War was defined as a conflict between two states, the disappearance of one of them means

<sup>10</sup> 'Why the End of the Cold War Doesn't Matter: The US War of Terror in Columbia', *Review of International Studies*, this issue.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); and Robert Cox, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this notion, see Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*, ch. 3.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Greg Fry and Jacinta O'Hagan (eds.), *Contending Images of World Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); and Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 2nd edn (New York: 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Any such list is, by its nature, contentious. However, these claims seem to me to be the most widely shared, even if the interpretations of them and their relative significance vary considerably across different theoretical and political positions.

that the war must be over, producing peace.<sup>15</sup> Second, the United States is the most powerful state in the international system, 'a global superpower without historical precedent'.<sup>16</sup> Reports of US decline in the 1980s were exaggerated, as Susan Strange argued at the time, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union there is no sign of a plausible challenger.<sup>17</sup> Third, with the demise of state socialism and the ideological battle between capitalism and communism, capitalism has emerged triumphant and is now virtually global in extent. After being largely confined to 'the Marxian fringe in IR', the end of the Cold War means discussion of capitalism can no longer be avoided.<sup>18</sup>

A fourth common assertion about world politics, generally hailed as a major disciplinary discovery, is that interstate war in the core of the international system is over.<sup>19</sup> Through some happy combination of liberal norms and institutions such as representative democracy and market economies, as well as interdependence, international organisations, nuclear weapons, and state power, states with a long history of warfare and located predominantly in North America and Western Europe no longer use military force to settle their disagreements. According to Robert Jervis, 'this is a change of spectacular proportions, perhaps the single most striking discontinuity that the history of international politics has anywhere provided'.<sup>20</sup> As a result of this discovery, it is now a commonplace to treat the international system as divided into two related but essentially distinct parts, a 'zone of peace' in which interstate war is over and a 'zone of conflict' everywhere else.<sup>21</sup>

A fifth, more contentious claim concerns globalisation, both as a set of empirical developments and as an emergent paradigm for understanding world politics.<sup>22</sup> For some, globalisation has come to replace the Cold War as the central drama of world politics. Defining globalisation in opposition to a Westphalian conception of the sovereign territorial state, scholars have pointed to the ways in which the stretching of political, cultural, and above all economic relations across borders is leading to a dramatically transformed context of state action, and remaking the state itself.<sup>23</sup> It is

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Ian Clark, *The Post-Cold War World: The Spoils of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> G. John Ikenberry, 'American Power and the Empire of Capitalist Democracy', *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), p. 191.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Strange, 'The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony', *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 551–74. On arguments for US decline and a survey of potential challengers, see John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1995), chs. 5 and 6.

<sup>18</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'Beyond Westphalia? Capitalism after the "Fall"', *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), Special Issue, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Shaw, *Theory of the Global State: Globality as Unfinished Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) is the most challenging account of this phenomenon. See also Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey (eds.), *Democracy, Liberalism and War: Rethinking the Democratic Peace Debates* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Jervis, 'Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace. Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 2001', *American Political Science Review*, 96 (2002), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 353–8.

<sup>22</sup> See, respectively, David Held et al., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999); and James H. Mittelman, 'Globalization as an Ascendant Paradigm?' *International Studies Perspectives*, 3 (2002), pp. 1–14.

<sup>23</sup> For a summary, see David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), chs. 5 and 6.

now common to discuss world politics in terms of emergent structures of global governance which transcend the territorial state.<sup>24</sup> But despite widespread agreement that something is happening, there is little agreement as to precisely what it is. All of the claims for fundamental transformation associated with globalisation remain contested.<sup>25</sup> The essential facts on which there is shared agreement and which structure debate, then, are: the end of the Cold War, US power, capitalism, and the 'zone of peace'. Any account of world order constructed within the boundaries of disciplinary commonsense must, to be plausible, take these facts into account and make sense of them.

A dominant theme in recent discussions of world order is change, and epochal change at that. One of the things we know, on the basis of the 'facts' sketched above, is that world politics is in certain respects fundamentally different from what it was during the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> Such perceptions have only proliferated after the US–UK attack on Iraq in March 2003. In the face of this change, both policymakers and scholars have spent considerable energy trying to determine the nature of what George Bush the Elder called 'the new world order'.<sup>27</sup> In large part, the primary motivation for these efforts was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Because the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was assumed to be the defining reality of world politics after World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s was necessarily the harbinger of a new world order. The disappearance of familiar signposts produced genuine distress and uncertainty as policymakers in Washington and elsewhere worried that US policy suddenly lacked direction. They struggled to identify a new grand strategy to replace 'containment', one that was responsive to the changed circumstances of international relations.<sup>28</sup> The future role of the sole remaining superpower was also a pressing concern for IR scholars. The discipline had come of age after World War II and remains dominated by US-based scholars, institutions, and concerns.<sup>29</sup> Scholars traced the implications of the end of the Cold War for theoretical models and accounts of state action.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See, for a critical discussion, Michael N. Barnett and Raymond Duvall (eds.) *Power and Global Governance* (forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Polity, 1999). On the dubious novelty of globalization, see A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Robert Jervis, 'A Usable Past for the Future', in Michael J. Hogan (ed.), *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 257–68.

<sup>27</sup> George Bush, 'Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit', 11 September 1990, *Public Papers of the Presidents, George Bush, 1990*, Book II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 1219.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Josef Joffe, '"Bismarck" or "Britain"? Toward an American grand strategy after bipolarity', *International Security*, 19(1995), pp. 94–117; and Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, 'Competing visions for US grand strategy', *International Security*, 21(1996), pp. 5–53.

<sup>29</sup> See Stanley Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus* 106 (1977), pp. 41–60; Steve Smith, 'The Discipline of International Relations: Still An American Social Science?', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2 (2000), pp. 374–402; and Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America's Rivalries in the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> For a representative example, see Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

Not surprisingly, a major concern was the inability of existing models to account for large-scale change, and the need to develop new ones that could. After the Cold War, scholars too sought to identify the defining characteristics of what was assumed to be a dramatically altered international system.

What, then, is the nature of the contemporary world order? And what is the place of the United States in it? Taking into account the 'facts' about our world, at least two general accounts of world order can be identified.<sup>31</sup> Both see a liberal world order. In one it is dominated by the United States; in the other, it is not.

The first account sees a world order dominated by the US state. Against the widespread assumption that Soviet collapse would usher in a multipolar international system, this account points instead to the obvious fact that there is only one superpower left. The continuing reality of US power, argues Michael Cox, amounts to a 'new American hegemony'.<sup>32</sup> In military terms, the United States remains the overwhelmingly dominant world power, whether measured by annual military spending, technical superiority, logistical capacity, global bases, or sheer weight of armament. Politically, the United States is the dominant power in a range of international institutions in trade, finance, and security. Moreover, we are also seeing the internationalisation of US legal structures and policing practices, a trend accelerated after 11 September.<sup>33</sup> Economically, the spending power of US consumers drives world trade, the dollar remains the world economy's dominant currency, US corporations dominate world trade and production, and the world's financial markets are profoundly shaped by 'the dollar-Wall Street axis'.<sup>34</sup> These institutional links and ongoing processes reinforce the power and centrality of the US state in the contemporary world order.

The second account also sees world politics dominated by a liberal order. But as Ikenberry argues, '*Pax Americana* is not just a powerful country [sic] throwing its weight around. It is a political formation with its own logic and laws of motion. It is an order that was created and sustained by American power but it is not simply a reflection of that power.'<sup>35</sup> Following World War II and driven initially by the United States, international military, trade, and political relations were progressively institutionalised, leading to growing interdependence between states in Western Europe, North America and East Asia. Over time, these institutions reinforced and promoted shared norms of liberal governance, free-market economies, free trade, and human rights. Adler refers to the emergence of a transnational 'civic culture', a shared set of norms and identity.<sup>36</sup> In common with other states large and small,

<sup>31</sup> Descriptions of world politics in terms of a new medievalism share a number of features with the second account above; see Jorg Friedrichs, 'The Meaning of the New Medievalism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 7 (2001), pp. 475–502.

<sup>32</sup> Cox, 'Whatever happened to American decline?', p. 331.

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Ethan Nadelmann, *Cops Across Borders: The Internationalization of US Criminal Law Enforcement* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Gowan, *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance* (London: Verso, 1999). But cf. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, pp. 300–356.

<sup>35</sup> Ikenberry, 'American Power and the Empire of Capitalist Democracy', p. 212. Similar arguments are made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (1997), pp. 319–63.

the United States is embedded in a post-Westphalian order of 'transnational liberalism'.<sup>37</sup> That order transcends the power or interest of any particular state or group of states.

There is of course room for debate within and between these accounts of world order – the liberal order has never been entirely homogeneous,<sup>38</sup> for example, raising questions for both accounts sketched above – but they share a number of features in common. Both see a liberal order that is peaceful internally and progressive in its effects abroad. Inside, the liberal world is characterised by shared liberal norms and institutions of democratic governance, free markets and free trade, and respect for human rights. Capitalist relations of ownership and production are taken for granted, and often equated with liberalism. Outside, it seeks to extend these norms where it can, whether through the actions of states, international organisations, or NGOs, and to defend them where it cannot. In relations with external powers, the liberal world is peaceful but not pacifist: it will respond with force if necessary to defend itself, as the responses to Iraqi aggression in Kuwait and to Al-Qaeda demonstrate. Indeed, force – supplied primarily by the United States – is increasingly seen as a viable instrument for making non-liberal spaces into liberal ones, as in Iraq and the Middle East more generally, thereby extending the zone of peace to an ever greater part of the earth's surface.

A final significant feature common to both accounts of contemporary world order is a turn to the language of empire in an effort to capture what is distinctive about the post-Cold War world. In the first account, for instance, the sheer scale of US power has recently led to a new-found willingness amongst the media, policymakers and academics matter-of-factly to describe the United States as an empire, albeit a benign one.<sup>39</sup> US imperialism is, on this view, alive and well and increasingly seen as a good thing, both for the United States and for world order more generally. In the second account, it is the liberal world order itself that is referred to as an empire, an 'empire of capitalist democracy', albeit with the United States at its centre.<sup>40</sup> On this view, imperialism in the traditional geopolitical sense is over. Instead, we can speak of an essentially benign liberal or cosmopolitan imperialism, as the new principles of world order are gradually extended, sometimes by force but always in the service of liberal good intentions, to new spaces.<sup>41</sup>

The return of empire and imperialism in disciplinary accounts of world politics after the Cold War marks a point of convergence with Chomsky's analysis of world order. When examined from his viewpoint, however, such accounts appear in a sharply different light.

<sup>37</sup> Agnew and Corbridge, *Mastering Space*, ch. 7; Robert Latham, *The Liberal Moment: Modernity, Security, and the Making of Postwar International Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> Latham, *The Liberal Moment* makes this point.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Sebastian Mallaby, 'The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire', *Foreign Affairs*, 81(2002), pp. 2–7. Of course, empires always represent themselves as benign.

<sup>40</sup> The most prominent exponents of this view are Ikenberry, 'American Power and the Empire of Capitalist Democracy' and Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; cf. Friedrichs, 'The New Medievalism'.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

**Chomsky on world orders, old and new<sup>42</sup>**

Chomsky has a long-standing interest in world order, and the closely-related issue of how we might discern its patterns. Beginning with his analyses of the US war against Vietnam, US foreign policy and imperialism have been central to Chomsky's view of world politics.<sup>43</sup> The Cold War, its relation to US foreign policy, and its significance for world politics more generally is also an abiding concern.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting his libertarian socialism, Chomsky is keenly attentive to capitalism and relations of class power.<sup>45</sup> In a number of ways, then, his work offers a useful comparison with disciplinary accounts of the post-Cold War order. Chomsky does not see the contemporary world order, centred on the United States, as benign or particularly liberal. For him, it is more akin to what Mohammeden Ould-Mey describes as a 'global command economy',<sup>46</sup> dominated by US military and political power.

Chomsky's analysis of world politics grows out of his understanding of power and its significance for human freedom. As an anarchist, much of his work – on ideology, propaganda, and the hypocrisy of political leaders and intellectuals for example – stems from an interest in how power shapes the context of people's everyday lives. Human beings, argues Chomsky, have a variety of innate capacities, of which the most fundamental 'is the capacity and the need for creative self-expression, for free control of one's own life and thought'. He also regards it as 'a fundamental human need to take part in the democratic control of social institutions'.<sup>47</sup> But which of these capacities is realised, and in what ways, depends on the institutional context structuring the social environment. For example, Chomsky regards private property as an obstacle to human freedom. A rich understanding of institutionalised power, in all its forms and effects, is a necessary prerequisite to remaking the world in ways that enhance human freedom. It is for this reason that Chomsky finds the work of Foucault insightful, while disagreeing with him on other issues.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that Chomsky, together with Foucault, is part of a 'left realist' tradition stretching back through E.H. Carr to Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx and defined by an emphasis on power and a scepticism of received wisdom and the claims of the powerful.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> This is the title of one of Chomsky's books; *World Orders, Old and New* (London: Pluto Press, 1997). In discussing his work, I focus primarily on Chomsky's scholarly publications.

<sup>43</sup> *American Power and the New Mandarins*; *At War with Asia: Essays on Indochina* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); *For Reasons of State* (London: Fontana, 1973); and *The Backroom Boys* (London: Fontana, 1973).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, *Deterring Democracy*; and *World Orders, Old and New*.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*; and Chomsky, *Profits over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Mohameden Ould-Mey, 'The New Global Command Economy', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 17 (1999), pp. 155–80.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*, p. 102.

<sup>48</sup> See the debate between Chomsky and Foucault, 'Human Nature versus Power', in Fons Elders (ed.), *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974); online in two parts at [monkeyfist.com/ChomskyArchive/talks/foucault1.html](http://monkeyfist.com/ChomskyArchive/talks/foucault1.html) and [/foucault2.html](http://monkeyfist.com/ChomskyArchive/talks/foucault2.html).

<sup>49</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper and Row, 1946); on Weber's relationship with Nietzsche, see William Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1988).

Of course, this is not the statist realism that came to dominate the discipline after World War II. Unlike IR realists, Chomsky is deeply suspicious of the state. Worship of the state 'has become a secular religion for which the intellectuals serve as a priesthood'.<sup>50</sup> It has also blinded them to its true character. With Bakunin, Chomsky sees the state as 'the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses . . .'.<sup>51</sup> More concretely, the state 'is a system of institutions, including private institutions that set conditions for public policy, which are relatively stable, changing slowly if at all. These constitute the actual nexus of decision-making power in the society, including investment and political decisions, setting the framework within which public policy can be discussed and is determined.' The government, in contrast, 'consists of whatever groups happen to control the political system, one component of the state system, at a particular moment'.<sup>52</sup> Class power structures the context within which the political system and the state system more generally operates.

Similar concerns motivate Chomsky's analysis of the modern corporation. In common with early twentieth-century liberal writers, Chomsky sees the corporation as an authoritarian and totalitarian organisation, concerned more with command than with the rational pursuit of profit and the efficient production and distribution of goods and services.<sup>53</sup> The legal personality of the modern corporation and the wider institutional context within which it operates are a political achievement, the long-term product of the use of public power for private ends.<sup>54</sup> Quite apart from the resources corporations can bring to bear on state managers, through the institutions of the law the privileges of property are built into the structure of the state itself. Like private property and the state, for Chomsky corporations represent concentrations of unaccountable power, and as such are an obstacle to democracy and the exercise of human freedom. In his principled focus on power, in diverse forms and places, Chomsky is a more thorough-going and consistent realist than many who self-consciously claim the title.

When he turns to world order, Chomsky's analysis is shaped by these assumptions. The foreign policy of a particular state reflects domestic structures of class power. Chomsky rejects the notion that 'nations' are the basic actors in world politics. Inside each nation, he argues, there are 'radical differences in privilege and power'.<sup>55</sup> In the United States, for example, the contemporary domestic power structure consists of 'the industrial-financial-commercial sector, concentrated and interlinked, highly class conscious, and increasingly transnational in the scope of its planning, management and operations'.<sup>56</sup> Patterns in foreign policy, in particular the often stark elision between the stated aims of policy and its actual effects, and the repeated willingness to use force against the weak, are traceable to these structures of power and interest, which are persistent over time. But this is only half the story.

<sup>50</sup> *Detering Democracy*, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> *For Reasons of State*, pp. 7, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Rai, p. 91; see also Edgley, chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>53</sup> As in other of his writings, Chomsky takes the side of classical liberals, with their suspicion of concentrated power, against contemporary neoliberals. For a related argument in the context of IR, see Christian Reus-Smit, 'The Strange Death of Liberal International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Law*, 12 (2001), pp. 573–94.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Alan Wolfe, *The Limits of Legitimacy* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

<sup>55</sup> *World Orders, Old and New*, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Class interests are not confined to particular states but extend across the international system. A key organising principle of world order, argues Chomsky, is that 'the rich men of the rich societies are to rule the world, competing among themselves for a greater share of wealth and power and mercilessly suppressing those who stand in their way, assisted by the rich men of the hungry nations who do their bidding. The others serve, and suffer.' Or, put more simply, 'All for ourselves, and nothing for other people'.<sup>57</sup> Chomsky has fleshed out and substantiated these propositions in a series of detailed empirical analyses.

We are now in a position to consider where and how Chomsky's work challenges the disciplinary accounts of world order I sketched above. There is *prima facie* disagreement on at least three issues, two substantive and one methodological: the peaceful and benign character – both internally and externally – of the contemporary world order; the extent to which that order is liberal; and the empirical evidence for these claims.

It is more or less axiomatic in IR that the liberal order, in whichever form, is peaceful and benign, both internally and in its relations with the outside. Chomsky's work points to a range of empirical phenomena that raise doubts about both of these claims. Against the standard liberal problematics of legitimacy and representation, Chomsky opens up a different set of questions – organised around the administration of populations – that challenge the self-understandings of liberal societies. Within social formations shaped by dramatic differences in wealth and power, he argues, population control is a persistent problem: the poor and the disadvantaged, who outnumber the rich and the well-off, are ever likely to challenge this state of affairs. How is such a system of inequality maintained? Chomsky has focused, with Edward Herman, on the ideological control of populations in 'market democracies'.<sup>58</sup> Population control also takes coercive forms, as Chomsky's work on state terror amply demonstrates. The key point is that careful attention to the structures of everyday life in liberal societies reveals that they are not peaceful and, to the extent that they are or appear to be, these effects are achieved through a variety of mechanisms linked to the reproduction of a structure of systematic inequality. Thus, a focus on the most mundane form of state power, policing, for example, provides a different view of the liberal order and challenges its self-image as internally peaceful and non-coercive.<sup>59</sup> These mechanisms are not confined to particular social formations; they extend across the liberal order. In recent decades, policing within the 'zone of peace' has undergone transformations attributable to the rise of 'market society', a euphemism for the radical restructuring of economic life under the rubric of globalisation.<sup>60</sup> These ongoing developments long predate 11 September and 'the war on terrorism' and have produced an expanded and increasingly internationalised coercive apparatus.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 5, quoting Adam Smith.

<sup>58</sup> As in *Manufacturing Consent*, for example.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); see also Ian Taylor, *Crime in Context: A Critical Criminology of Market Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> See Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 'Policing and Global Governance', in Michael N. Barnett and Raymond D. Duvall (eds.), *Power and Global Governance*.

Chomsky's work also puts in question claims that the liberal order is benign and progressive in its external relations. One obvious example, continuing the focus on population control, is the increasingly coercive policing of borders between the liberal world order and its outside against flows of people, many of whom have been displaced in part as a result of the policies promoted by liberal world agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank,<sup>62</sup> or as a result of Western support for repressive and militarised regimes, as in Central America. Chomsky highlights continuities both in the stated aims of liberal world agencies and the effects of their actions and points to a long-standing imperial pattern in North-South relations.<sup>63</sup> Such patterns are consistent with an account of world order predicated on a class analysis and also undermine claims for a sharp discontinuity between the Cold War and the post-Cold War world. Indeed, the persistence of Northern intervention in the South, before, during and after the Cold War, leads Chomsky to the conclusion that 'The Cold War can be understood . . . as a phase of the North-South confrontation, so unusual it took on a life of its own, but grounded in the familiar [imperial] logic'.<sup>64</sup>

It is also more or less axiomatic that the contemporary world order is liberal. This too, argues Chomsky, is a highly contentious claim, if by liberal is meant a world defined by respect for human rights and strong restraints on state power, for example. The lack of respect for human rights by the leading liberal powers and the general prevalence of 'the rule of force in world affairs' are persistent themes in Chomsky's work.<sup>65</sup> Analysis of the mundane practices of population control manifested in policing points in a similar direction: within liberal societies, state powers are being steadily expanded and civil liberties are increasingly under threat. Again, these developments predate the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Indeed, if anything the 'war on terrorism' has provided state agencies with a pretext for expanding their reach in ways already planned, in Britain, the United States, and the European Union, for example.<sup>66</sup>

A more profound challenge to claims that 'the liberal world order' is in fact liberal stems from his recognition of the ways in which the rise of the modern state and the corporation, as institutionalised concentrations of power, challenge the assumptions that underpinned the original arguments of classical liberals like Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Part of what is at stake here is the sheer inapplicability of the categories of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century social and political thought to the realities of power in the very different societies of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. A world in which, for example, a large percentage of international trade takes the form of intra-firm exchanges is not recognisably liberal. Notions of 'free trade' and 'free trade agreements' (for example, NAFTA) are put in doubt, if not

<sup>62</sup> The classic analysis is Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Capital and Labour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For an excellent case study, see Leslie Gill, *Teetering on the Rim: Global Restructuring, Daily Life, and the Armed Retreat of the Bolivian State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*.

<sup>64</sup> *World Orders, Old and New*, p. 77. See also Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World: United States Foreign Policy 1945–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs* (London: Pluto, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, the extensive documentation of these issues for the EU by Statewatch; <www.statewatch.org>

rendered simply ideological, by the internalisation of cross-border transactions within firms, and the domination of global markets by private bureaucracies in the form of MNCs.

Stepping back from the specific patterns of world order, Chomsky's writings also highlight the weak empirical basis of many IR accounts, not least a tendency to overlook past US foreign policy and its consequences. As Walter LaFeber points out, 'Chomsky is instructive about the present and future because he is serious about the past. . . . And he is deadly serious about the use of evidence.'<sup>67</sup> The array of data considered relevant to an analysis of the contemporary world order in many IR accounts is relatively meagre or selective when compared to Chomsky's work. For example, as he has repeatedly pointed out, analysis of US foreign policy tends systematically to accept at face value the stated aims of policymakers and to ignore the consequences for those on the receiving end. The negative implications for analysis are perhaps clearest in the case of terrorism. Chomsky shows how terrorism comes to be understood as the use of force by non-state actors, thus obscuring the much greater and more frequent resort to terror by states, including the United States and its allies. At the same time, however, US-backed non-state terror is ignored or defended. State terrorism is acknowledged in mainstream circles 'only when conducted by official enemies. When the US and its [state and non-state] clients are the agents, they are acts of retaliation and self-defense in the service of democracy and human rights.'<sup>68</sup>

Other examples are easy to find. In his discussion of the 'new' empire of capitalist democracy, and the central role of the United States within it, John Ikenberry refers matter-of-factly to the multicultural character of US political identity and to the closely related notion of civic nationalism. 'US projection outward of domestic principles of inclusive and rule-based international political organization' and 'a bias in favour of rule-based and multilateral approaches to the organization of hegemonic power' are attributed to these aspects of US identity.<sup>69</sup> Ikenberry makes no reference to the huge literature critical of multiculturalism in the US.<sup>70</sup> Nor does he discuss the relations between race, social and economic power, and the use of force and violence in the US. It is hard to see multiculturalism in the operation of the US criminal justice system, for example, which routinely imprisons and executes disproportionate numbers of people of colour, in the policing of US borders or the war on drugs.<sup>71</sup> Viewed from this angle, Ikenberry's account of the role of multiculturalism in the empire of capitalist democracy looks empirically insupportable and complacent in failing adequately to interrogate the terms and assumptions that structure the analysis.

<sup>67</sup> 'Chomsky's Challenges', in Otero, *Noam Chomsky: Critical Assessments*, vol II, p. 320.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Noam Chomsky, 'International Terrorism: Image and Reality', in Alexander George, *Western State Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 34; and Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988).

<sup>69</sup> Ikenberry, 'American Power and the Empire of Capitalist Democracy', pp. 209–11.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Jon Cruz, 'From Farce to Tragedy: Reflections on the Reification of Race at Century's End', in Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (eds.), *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Parenti, *Lockdown America*.

Weak empirical foundations and a tendency too easily to take the state's own word for what it is doing undermine many IR efforts to offer a plausible account of contemporary world order and reinforce the tendency to overstate discontinuity. In contrast, Chomsky's work routinely deploys a much wider array of empirical evidence,<sup>72</sup> and pays attention to how power works at both the highest and the lowest rungs, enabling him to subject the claims and problem definitions of state actors to critical analysis. In a variety of ways, then, Chomsky's work provides an important challenge and a corrective to claims made by IR scholars as they seek to describe the contemporary world order.

### Elaborations and qualifications: Chomsky and IR

IR scholars accord Chomsky little respect; the reverse is also true. Chomsky is frankly sceptical about the discipline of IR. Asked what were his qualifications to speak on world affairs, Chomsky replied: 'None whatsoever. I mean the qualifications that I have to speak on world affairs are exactly the same ones Henry Kissinger has, and Walt Rostow has, or anybody in the Political Science department, professional historians – none, none that you don't have.'<sup>73</sup> Not only does he claim to have no qualifications, Chomsky is also suspicious of the motives of those who claim they are necessary.

I think the idea that you're supposed to have special qualifications to talk about world politics is just another scam . . . it's just another technique for making the population think they don't know anything, and they'd better stay out of it and let us smart guys run it. In order to do that, what you pretend is that there's some esoteric discipline, and you've got to have some letters after your name before you can say anything about it. The fact is, that's a joke.<sup>74</sup>

Related claims about the need to know a relevant body of theory are also linked to the internal dynamics of the academy and the status anxiety of social scientists in relation to natural ones: 'intellectuals make a career of trying to make simple things look hard, because that's part of the way you get your salary paid and so on';<sup>75</sup> so much for the discipline of IR, then.

Not surprisingly, Chomsky is highly sceptical about both the necessity and the status of IR theory. This scepticism stems from his doubts about the role of theory in understanding the social world more generally.

[W]orld affairs are trivial: there's nothing in the social sciences or history or whatever that is beyond the intellectual capacities of an ordinary fifteen year old. You have to do a little work, you have to do some reading, you have to be able to think, but there's nothing deep – if there are any theories around that require some special kind of training to understand, then they've been kept a closely guarded secret.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Edward Said, 'Permission to Narrate' in *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994).

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Mitchell and Schoeffel, *Understanding Power*, p. 137. This volume consists of transcribed recordings of question and answer sessions between Chomsky and various audiences; see 'Editors' Preface', pp. xi–xii.

<sup>74</sup> *Understanding Power*, p. 137.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 229.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137. See also Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky*, pp. 29–32.

In the past two decades, IR has witnessed an explosion of theoretical activity; as a result, it comprises 'a range of alternative, overlapping and competing theories of world politics'.<sup>77</sup> The increasing theoretical sophistication and diversity of the field is generally understood as a positive development. In contrast, Chomsky denies his work is theoretical in any meaningful sense. Stressing the centrality of facts and the empirical investigation of cases, Chomsky asserts 'the fact of the matter is, the social world – to the extent that we understand it at all – is more or less right there in front of you after you sort of peel away the blinders a little'.<sup>78</sup>

Remarks of this kind pepper Chomsky's work and sound naïve in light of the post-positivist and theoretically self-conscious character of much recent work in IR and in social theory more generally.<sup>79</sup> Chomsky also claims not to understand contemporary figures like Derrida, for example, and equates Marxism with theology; 'when words like "dialectics" come along, or "hermeneutics", and all this kind of stuff that's supposed to be very profound, like Goering, "I reach for my revolver"'.<sup>80</sup> Such comments suggest that Chomsky is theoretically illiterate (at least when it comes to social theory), and so can be ignored as just a radical critic. Dismissing 'the most important intellectual alive' as a naïve polemicist flatters the sensibilities of a field accurately described only twenty years ago as 'the backward discipline'<sup>81</sup> because of its lack of theoretical sophistication; it is also a mistake.

Understanding Chomsky's view of theory and IR, and his work more generally, requires that we examine his conceptions of what constitutes theory, and of the politics of theory. Chomsky explicitly denies that his political analyses are theoretical. For example, 'my own political writing is often denounced from both the left and the right for being non-theoretical – and that's completely correct. But it's exactly as theoretical as everyone else's, I just don't call it "theoretical", I call it "trivial" – which is in fact what it is'.<sup>82</sup> What then counts as theory, in Chomsky's eyes? In his scientific writings, on linguistics, Chomsky adopts a rationalist approach to knowledge production. Indeed, 'modern linguistics', a field profoundly shaped by Chomsky, 'is a rationalist discipline *par excellence*'.<sup>83</sup> Philosophically, rationalism is contrasted with empiricism. Where empiricism operates by gathering ever more facts, and manipulating empirical materials through experimental and other methods, rationalism begins by assuming that empirical phenomena are the product of a deeper, unobservable set of relations. The aim of analysis is to identify that hidden order. Stephen Toulmin captures the relationship rather well: 'For the empiricists, truth has flowed primarily 'upwards' from particular observation-statements to the general theoretical statements for which they were the supporting evidence; . . . for

<sup>77</sup> Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Understanding Power*, p. 211.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Press, 1994), and Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds.), *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>80</sup> *Understanding Power*, pp. 227, 228–230, 231.

<sup>81</sup> George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, pp. 16–18.

<sup>82</sup> *Understanding Power*, p. 229; see also 137.

<sup>83</sup> David Sylvan and Barry Glassner, *A Rationalist Methodology for the Social Sciences* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1985), p. 4. My brief account of rationalism follows Sylvan and Glassner.

the rationalists, it has flowed 'downwards', from general laws and principles to the particular statements of which they provided an interpretation . . .<sup>84</sup> We find parallel statements in Chomsky's discussion of social science: 'Is there anything in the social sciences that even merits the term "theory"? That is, some explanatory system involving hidden structures with non-trivial principles that provide understandings of phenomena? If so I've missed it.'<sup>85</sup> Chomsky equates 'theory' with rationalism, as in his work in linguistics. Grasping the specific sense in which Chomsky uses the term opens up space for considering Chomsky's political writings as theoretical in the much broader sense common in IR.

Any critical redescription of social reality, of the kind that is Chomsky's stock-in-trade, presupposes some sort of a theoretical framework. Chomsky is in fact quite explicit about what his is, making reference to Bakunin's conception of the state and Smith's class analysis, for example. In his political writings, as in his work on the Cold War, for instance, Chomsky 'is not merely performing a mechanical reporting chore, from some Archimedean point outside propaganda and cliché: he is doing something extremely sophisticated, underpinned by standards of argument, coherence, and proof that are not derived from the merely "factual"'.<sup>86</sup> In rejecting Marxism as theology, for example – Chomsky isn't a Marxist and claims to have little time for him – he also argues that Marx 'introduced some interesting concepts . . . which every sensible person ought to have mastered and employ, notions like class, and relations of production . . .'.<sup>87</sup> These and other concepts structure Chomsky's political analyses and help him to make sense of our world. Chomsky's political analyses are conceptually and theoretically informed in standard social science fashion.

Chomsky's work is also compatible with standard views of social science as necessarily critical: his alternative account of the Cold War as but a moment in a much longer North-South struggle, for example, is a model of the ways in which social analysis must begin by putting accepted representations in doubt.<sup>88</sup> Undertaking such work, and understanding world politics more generally, argues Chomsky, is not an easy task. Indeed, it is 'somewhere between awfully difficult and utterly hopeless for an isolated individual. But it's feasible for anyone who is part of a cooperative community . . .'.<sup>89</sup> Chomsky frequently refers to the large number of people around the world, many of whom he has never met, who enable his work by sharing information, documents and insights.<sup>90</sup> Writing from within an extended set of activist communities and networks, Chomsky is in certain respects reminiscent of Marx, who described science as a collective activity that required the 'all-sided

<sup>84</sup> *Human Understanding* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), quoted in Sylvan and Glassner, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Edgley, p. 29. See Sylvan and Glassner, *A Rationalist Methodology*, for several examples of rationalist social science.

<sup>86</sup> Edward Said, 'Permission to Narrate', p. 267.

<sup>87</sup> *Understanding Power*, p. 228.

<sup>88</sup> On critical social science, see Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium*, 10 (1981), pp. 126–55; and David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

<sup>89</sup> 'On Staying Informed and Intellectual Self-Defense.' Online at <[http://www.zmag.org/ZSustainers/ZDaily/1999-03%5Cmar\\_8\\_1999.htm](http://www.zmag.org/ZSustainers/ZDaily/1999-03%5Cmar_8_1999.htm)>

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, the Preface to *World Orders, Old and New*, p. vii.

observation which can only proceed from many heads'. Intersubjectively regulated observation, in turn, provides the facts that 'furnish the test of theories'.<sup>91</sup> Grounded in a particular set of social interests and emancipatory concerns, Chomsky's research practice is thus consistent with a fairly standard view of how social science works, and critical social science in particular.

Chomsky's oft-expressed scepticism about theory and social science and his appeal to facts and empirical cases also derive from his understanding of the politics of theory. From his very earliest writings, the relationship between intellectuals and power has been a constant theme in Chomsky's work. Much social science analysis, and analysis of world politics in particular, functions as a kind of imperialist apologia.<sup>92</sup> Too many analyses of world politics, including those produced within disciplinary IR as I argued above, fail to achieve even a minimal level of empirical adequacy when measured against Chomsky's work. They leave some things out, overlook others, and as a result wind up accepting at face value descriptions of phenomena (for example, 'free trade,' 'multilateralism,' 'terrorism,' 'the Cold War') that are politically interested, with significant ideological effects. It makes little sense to engage in theory construction, whether positivist or post-positivist, when our grasp of the basic empirical materials on which theory must draw and operate is so poor. Chomsky's rejection of theory and resort to the facts can be read as a principled response to this state of affairs. In relation to IR, Chomsky's passion for the facts is a sobering and necessary corrective for a field that is often too keen to theorise too much on too thin an empirical foundation.<sup>93</sup>

Chomsky's writings on world politics are motivated by a deep political and ethical concern. As he argued in 1966, 'In general, the history of imperialism and of imperialist apologia, particularly as seen from the point of view of those at the wrong end of the guns, should be a central part of any civilized curriculum'. Knowledge of this history was a necessary part of what Chomsky termed a programme of 'intellectual self-defense',<sup>94</sup> that is, the building up of resources, mental as well as social, to enable individuals and groups to pierce the systematic propaganda and distortions that shroud the realities of world politics. Such a programme was a necessary first step to remaking our world. These themes – imperialism, its histories and apologia, the point of view of 'those at the wrong end of the guns' – are constant in Chomsky's work; they are less central to IR.<sup>95</sup> 'Theory' has, as he demonstrates over and over, often functioned as an apology for power and been used as a means to deny the significance of the kind of empirical data that is integral to his work. It has also served as a means to reproduce hierarchies between 'ordinary people', who are presumed not to know very much about the world, and intel-

<sup>91</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicholas (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 608 and 119.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Chomsky, 'Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship', in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969). Compare, Oren, *Our Enemies and Us*.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Alexander E. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>94</sup> 'American Intellectuals and the Schools', *Harvard Educational Review*, 36 (1966), pp. 484–91; reprinted in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 252.

<sup>95</sup> See Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31(2002), pp. 109–27.

lectuals, who do. The political, profoundly democratic point is to empower people to believe that they can in fact find out how their world works, and to legitimate their findings.

In a curious way, the repeated appeal to the facts and the denial that there is anything 'theoretical' about his political analyses works against Chomsky's emancipatory aims. As Edward Said points out, 'Chomsky does not reflect theoretically on what he does; he just does it. So, on the one hand, he leaves us to suppose that telling the truth is a simple matter while, on the other hand, he compiles masses of evidence showing that no one can really deal with the facts.'<sup>96</sup> People need theory as well as facts to make sense of the world; the two go hand in hand and Chomsky's political writings are no exception. The rejection of the label 'theory' in Chomsky's texts, however defensible in its own terms as I have shown, has the unintended effect of making it that much harder for people to appreciate the necessity of abstract thinking and philosophical under-labouring in the analysis of the social world. By obscuring the role of what social scientists call theory in his work, and the dependence of facts on it, Chomsky might actually make it harder for people to emancipate themselves from ruling illusions.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the lack of attention he receives, there is no good reason to exclude Chomsky's writings from the broad range of material already included within the interdisciplinary of IR. Indeed, as I have argued, there are very good reasons for doing just the opposite. Chomsky's political writings are theoretically informed and more sophisticated than he is usually given credit for, as Alison Edgley and others have demonstrated. Against the thin empirical bases on which much international theory is built, they are also a salutary reminder of the necessity of engaging with the world empirically as we seek to understand and explain it theoretically. Instead of cheap comments about his lack of credentials, or the polemical nature of his writings, then, we would do better to consider Chomsky's work on its merits, as offering better or worse answers to a variety of serious questions. None of this is to prejudge the issue: there is doubtless plenty to disagree with in Chomsky's accounts of US foreign policy, the media, and world politics more generally. But in an age of widespread liberal triumphalism, increased concentration of corporate media, and accelerating barbarism and violence on a global scale, we could do worse – indeed, much worse – than to engage with his principled and rigorous efforts to understand and explain our world.

That said, Chomsky is not a great undiscovered IR theorist: his work is widely known by IR scholars, if too often only by reputation. Even to discuss him in these terms doesn't make much sense. Chomsky denies that what most IR scholars do is in fact 'theory' and doubts there is anything about the analysis of social realities that requires theory. I have questioned these views, and pointed to the philosophical and political reasons why Chomsky holds them. His commitment is to other things, in

<sup>96</sup> Said, 'Permission to Narrate', p. 267.

particular the effort to help people free themselves from illusions and deceptions produced in the service of defending institutionalised forms of power and privilege. Next to that kind of work, building better IR theory – however important in itself – looks like pretty small beer.