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Noam Chomsky and the realist tradition

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Abstract. This article examines the assumptions that underlie Noam Chomsky's politics and argues that his analysis of US foreign policy since World War II may best be situated within the realist tradition in international relations. Chomsky's left realism has not been adequately understood or addressed by IR scholars for both political and disciplinary reasons. In opposition to most classical realists, he has insisted that intellectuals should resist rather than serve national power interests. In contrast to most political scientists, he has also refused to theorize, critiquing much of the enterprise of social science in terms of what he sees as highly suspect power interests within the academy. Hostility to Chomsky's normative commitments has consequently prevented IR scholars from discerning key aspects of his project, as well as important historical and theoretical continuities between radical and realist thought.

Introduction

Noam Chomsky has variously described his politics as 'left libertarian', 'libertarian socialist' and 'anarchist', yet it is not clear how these terms might be applied to his understanding of international relations since there are no coherent left libertarian, libertarian socialist or anarchist schools of IR theory. Some scholars have concluded as a result that Chomsky's analysis of international affairs must emerge from Marxian assumptions.[1] This is a grave misreading of Chomsky, however, that ignores his many sharply critical statements about Marxian theory and his refusal to identify his politics with Marxian scholarship.[2] The question therefore arises: Where should Chomsky's politics be located, if at all, within the discipline of international studies? Chomsky's normative commitments, it is widely recognised, emerge from radical currents within Enlightenment liberalism.[3] But Chomsky's analytical reading of power in the international system, and of US foreign policy

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[1] See, for example, Stephen Ambrose, 'Recent Books on International Relations', in *Foreign Affairs*, 72:4 (September, October 2003), p. 161.

[2] See Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*: *The Indispensable Chomsky*, (eds), Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 227–9; and Milan Rai, *Chomsky's Politics* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 94–5.

[3] See Alison Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 42–79; James McGilvray, *Chomsky: Language, Mind, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press,

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in particular, may best be situated, I will argue, within the realist tradition in international relations. Careful reading of Chomsky's writings thus highlights a widely overlooked fact within IR scholarship: the fact that there *is* a left realist tradition, and that this tradition challenges widely received views of how political realism should be understood and defined.[4]

1. Analytics of empire

The key assumptions of political realism, from Thucydides through such founding modern thinkers as Edward Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr, may be summarised as follows: 1) states are the most important units of analysis in international affairs; 2) the goal of states is power, whether as a means to other ends or as an end in itself; 3) the actions of states are basically rational, subject to analysis in terms of the pursuit of power; and 4) the international system, absent any controlling authority, is essentially 'anarchic' with outcomes being determined by relative balances of power.[5] From out of these claims, a distinctive realist temperament arises that has often been described as 'pessimistic' at its core.[6] Realists are sceptical as to the prospects for lasting peace and critical of the idea that humans are progressing toward a new world order grounded in international law or enlightened cosmopolitanism. It is in the very nature of politics among nations, if not human nature, the realist tradition declares, that ethics will be subordinated to the pursuit of power, that this will produce irreconcilable and often violent conflicts of interest, and that solutions to the dilemmas of strife and war must therefore be based not upon pious hopes in the evolving goodness or wisdom of states, but upon a thoroughly sober, 'hard ruthless analysis of reality.'[7]

All of these assumptions, we will see, are strikingly consistent with Chomsky's analysis of power in general, and of US power in particular. First, Chomsky accepts 'the state' as the primary unit of analysis in his politics, though in a more qualified sense than many realists allow. He broadly employs the language of agency, calculation and purpose to describe how the US, China, England and other states act on the world stage. Thus, for example, 'In July 1940, the US placed an embargo on aviation fuel, which Japan could obtain from no other

1999), pp. 177–203; Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*, pp. 96–7; and Neil Smith, *Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 176–188.

[4] Marky Laffey is, to my knowledge, the first to have used the phrase 'left realist' as well as to have connected it with Chomsky's politics. This paper is substantially a working out of Laffey's critical insight. See Mark Laffey, 'Discerning the Patterns of World Order: Noam Chomsky and International Theory After the Cold War', in *Review of International Studies*, 29:4 (2003), pp. 587–604.

[5] See Robert O. Keohane, (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 7.

[6] Stephen M. Walt, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', in *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1998, 110, pp. 29–44.

[7] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Perennial Books, 1939) p. 10.

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source [. . .] Meanwhile American aid to China was increasing'.[8] At the same time, Chomsky insists, if we are truly realistic in our analysis of international affairs we must not lose sight of what lies behind the abstraction of the state as a unitary political actor. The 'national interest' is not a self-evident fact but a socially constructed ordering of values. Hence, 'If we hope to understand anything about the foreign policy of any state, it is a good idea to begin by investigating the domestic social structure. Who sets foreign policy? What interests do these people represent? What is the domestic source of their power? It is a reasonable surmise that the policy that evolves will reflect the special interests of those who design it'.[9] Practically speaking, Chomsky suggests, these elite groups are 'the state'.

These observations should not be controversial to students of Hans Morgenthau, who by 1970 was linking 'the great issues of our day' – 'the militarisation of American life, the Vietnam war, race conflicts, poverty, the decay of the cities, the destruction of the natural environment' – to 'social and economic policies in whose continuation powerful social groups have a vested interest' and to 'the distribution of power in American society'.[10] According to Robert Gilpin, the state is 'a coalition of coalitions whose objectives and interests result from the powers and bargaining among the several coalitions composing the larger society and political elite'.[11] E. H. Carr similarly called attention to the relationship between factors of domestic control and the formation of the 'national interest'. Notions of social morality and purpose, Carr wrote in his classic statement of political realism, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 'are always the product of a dominant group which identifies itself with the community as a whole, and which possesses facilities denied to subordinate groups or individuals for imposing its view of life on the community'. Anyone who challenges the 'interests of the dominant group is made to incur the odium of assailing the alleged common interest of the whole community, and is told that in making his assault he is attacking his own higher interests'. But every notion of a 'harmony of interests', whether within or between states, is 'created by the overwhelming power of the privileged group'.[12] Because 'the disposition to hide self-interest behind the façade of pretended devotion to values, transcending self-interest, is well-nigh universal', Niebuhr wrote, the realistic political thinker must strive 'to take all factors in a social and political situation [. . .] into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power'.[13]

Once we understand how the 'national interest' is constructed by elite groups, we may proceed along with Chomsky to analyse the state's actions in terms of the second and third assumptions of political realism: the goal of the state (that is, the elites who control it) is to maximise power; and states pursue this goal according to rational planning, allowing us to make sense of their actions and even make

[8] Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: The New Press, 1969), p. 203.
[9] Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War: U.S. Foreign Policy From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: The New Press, 1982), p. 93.
[10] Morgenthau as cited in Noam Chomsky, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (New York: The New Press, 1971), pp. 76–7.
[11] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 19
[12] Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 79–80.
[13] Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Augustine's Political Realism', in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, (ed.), Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 123.

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limited predictions of how they will behave in the future. Rational planning based on purely pragmatic values and for the sake of maximising power, many of Chomsky's statements suggest, is in fact the very essence of US foreign policy, even during phases of so-called 'Wilsonian' or 'idealistic' rhetoric.[14] 'American politics is a politics of accommodation that successfully excludes moral considerations [. . .] only pragmatic considerations of cost and utility guide our actions'.[15] The idealist or 'utopian', Carr wrote, is invariably 'clothing his own interest in the guise of a universal interest for the purpose of imposing it on the rest of the world'.[16]

The years 1939 to 1945 are particularly important in Chomsky's analysis of international relations since it was during this period, he asserts, that planners in the State Department, working closely with individuals on the War and Peace Studies Project of the Council on Foreign Relations, most consciously and systematically set out to construct a new global order dominated by US capital, laying the ideological and strategic framework for the US's pursuit of global dominance up to the present day under the rubric of what they called 'Grand Area strategy'.[17] Quaker socialist A.J. Muste's 'prediction that the US would emerge as the world-dominant power was political realism', Chomsky writes, and 'to forecast that it would act accordingly, having achieved this status by force, was no less realistic'.[18] What was required, in what Chomsky describes as 'doctrinal language', was 'economic freedom', meaning the freedom of US corporations to invest, sell, and repatriate profits anywhere in the world, and 'stability', meaning a favourable investment climate abroad, regardless of the actual stability of states in terms of the well-being of their people. It made little difference to the planners what form of government a country developed as long as it remained an 'open society' in the key sense: 'open to American economic penetration or political control'.[19] 'Stability' and 'openness' for US investors might, in other words, require the active *destabilisation* of countries refusing to 'complement' US markets – a fact the Washington planners understood and accepted from the outset.

Countries in the Middle East, Latin America, and British and French colonial Asia were identified as primary threats to 'stability'. According to State Department documents, these regions included 'radical' and 'nationalistic' elements that were responsive to popular pressure for 'immediate improvement in the low living standards of the masses'. Improving the living standards of the 'masses', however, was not 'conducive to private investment'. Hence, one influential architect of the new order, George Kennan, advised, Washington needed to steel itself for conflict in the decades ahead, extricating itself from non-essential areas while consolidating its control over others deemed essential to US interests. 'We have about 50 per cent

[14] The 'idealistic' Wilson of international relations textbooks appears in a very different light in Walter Karp's *Politics of War*, in which he is seen manipulating the public to advance an unpopular war agenda in line with the interests of oligarchic elites and his personal ambitions, and ruthlessly suppressing political dissent and free speech through such draconian measures as the Espionage Act of 1917. See Walter Karp, *The Politics of War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).
[15] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 10.
[16] Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 75.
[17] Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War*, pp. 103–6; see also Laurence H. Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Braintrust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).
[18] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 165.
[19] Ibid., p. 353.

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of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 per cent of its population,' Kennan wrote in his secret 1948 'Policy Planning Study 23':

> In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity [. . .] We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction [. . .] We should cease to talk about vague and [. . .] unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better [. . .] We should make a careful study to see what parts of the Pacific and Far Eastern world are absolutely vital to our security, and we should concentrate our policy on seeing to it that those areas remain in hands which we can control or rely on.[20]

The focus of US policy, Kennan elsewhere explained, was the 'protection of our raw materials' from domestic populations who had fallen under the misguided notion that these resources, by accident of geography, belonged to them. To counter this 'radical' belief, Kennan suggested that the US cultivate close ties with foreign officials prepared to place American corporate interests above the interests of their own people. 'The final answer might be an unpleasant one,' he told a group of Latin American ambassadors, but 'we should not hesitate before police repression by the local government [. . .] It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists'.[21]

The threat of communism in underdeveloped parts of the globe was never the threat of military conquest, in Chomsky's reading of history, but the danger of a successful social alternative to Western capitalism. Communism was deemed particularly pernicious to the Grand Area planners because it offered a model of development that could not be integrated with US markets. Any such model, anywhere in the world, was a threat to US hegemony since freedom from the capitalist system might actually prove desirable to large masses of people. The 'rot', it was feared, would spread, calling into question the power and privilege of ruling elites at home as well as abroad. This is why European colonialism was preferable to indigenous communism – the reason for the US's entry into Vietnam[22] – as were fascist right-wing dictators to socialist revolutionaries, even when the former

[20] George Kennan, 'Policy Planning Study 23', in Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 226–7.

[21] Kennan as cited in Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), p. 107.

[22] President Eisenhower explained US policy in Vietnam in 1953 in the following terms: 'If Indo-China goes, the tin and tungsten we so greatly value would cease coming. We are after the cheapest way to prevent the occurrence of something terrible – the loss of our ability to get what we want from the riches of the Indo-Chinese territory and from Southeast Asia'. Yet tin and tungsten cannot explain the scale and ferocity of America's efforts to pacify Vietnam over the next two decades. 'The answer is no different in the case of America than in that of any other imperial power', wrote Bertrand Russell. 'The objects are domination, markets, cheap labor, raw materials, conscript armies and strategic points from which to control or threaten. If all of these factors do not apply to Vietnam itself, there is certain knowledge in Washington that the example of a successful Vietnamese uprising will destroy the empire by destroying the myth of American invincibility. What can happen in Vietnam can be repeated'. See John Duffett (ed.), *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal* (New York: O'Hare Books, 1968), pp. 4,19.

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engaged in massive human rights abuses and the latter did not. Human rights were incidental, if not irrelevant, to US interests.

Chomsky has little trouble, then, explaining continuities of violence involving the US across time and involving administrations of both political parties. There are underlying institutional and ideological aspects of US power, he suggests, that enable us to make sense of recurring patterns of coercion and aggression over many decades, including: Washington's installation of brutal and monarchical despots in Greece, Vietnam, and Iran in the 1950s; its overthrow of democratically elected leaders in Greece, Chile, Brazil, and Guatemala in the 1960s; its relentless pacification campaign in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to its 'secret' carpet bombing of Laos and Cambodia; its training, equipping, and funding of right-wing death squads in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador to prop up corrupt oligarchies and crush peasant guerrillas and Catholic clergy calling for land reform from the 1950s through the 1980s; its channelling of billions of dollars of military aid to notorious human rights offenders such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Columbia, even as they escalated atrocities against their own populations, in the 1990s; and its 2003 invasion of Iraq. All such actions, Chomsky suggests, may be easily understood within a rational framework of analysis that sees the powerful as seeking to maintain and to expand their dominance – political, economic, and military – by every means possible. According to Machiavelli, 'People should be either caressed or crushed'[23] – an elegant and parsimonious summary, for readers of Chomsky, of the actual policies at work in the project of American empire.

It would be a mistake to assume that policy-makers are typically engaged in *conscious* ruthlessness, conspiracy or deceit. Chomsky's realism, like Carr's and Morgenthau's, assumes that the psychological motivations of political actors are largely inaccessible to us but predicts that decision-makers will rarely if ever act out of 'evil' or 'bad motives'.[24] Where Morgenthau emphasised the failure of good-hearted but naïve leaders such as Neville Chamberlain to grasp the imperatives of power politics, however, Chomsky emphasises the naivety and subservience of the technical intelligentsia, who efficiently and cravenly serve pure power interests without even realising they are doing so (or with the weary sigh that they must make 'realistic' choices for the greater good). 'There is a striking similarity of internal to external rhetoric', Chomsky points out in his analysis of Vietnam-era planning documents. 'What had to be believed for the justification of American policy was, apparently, efficiently internalized'.[25] State bureaucrats 'pursue their grim and demanding vocation' and 'readily adopt beliefs that serve institutional needs', while 'those who do not will have to seek employment elsewhere'. The chairman of the board 'may sincerely believe that his every waking moment is dedicated to serving human needs'. And yet, 'Were he to act on these delusions instead of pursuing profit and market share, he would no longer be chairman of the board'.[26] It is institutional or structural necessities and factors of power, in other words, that typically generate the self-perceptions, values, goals,

[23] Niccolò Macchiavelli, *The Prince* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), p. 9.
[24] See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 6; and Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 73.
[25] Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (New York: The New Press, 1972), p. xxiv.
[26] Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions* (New York: South End Press, 1989), pp. 18–20.

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and actions of dominant groups, whether they are consciously aware of these facts or not.[27]

Obviously the powerful do not always succeed. Sometimes they are checked by other powerful groups, whether inside or outside the state. Sometimes they fail to achieve their goals because of their own hubris, miscalculation, and overreach. There are defections and unpredictable acts of defiance, even within systems of immense coercive power, such as Daniel Ellsberg's leaking of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. There are also important social and institutional constraints – gained through many decades of popular struggle – that limit what the powerful can achieve in a democratic society such as the US, which Chomsky sees as being uniquely free in many of its internal workings.[28] In general, though, Chomsky sees the international system – dominated by US economic and military might – as functioning along the lines classical realism predicts, not because of any necessity of human nature or society, but simply because those in power 'will continue to set the limits for change "within the system" so long as their authority and domination persist unchallenged'.[29] US foreign policy in the post-World War II period in this sense illustrates an elementary principle of international relations observed by Thucydides more than two thousand years ago: 'decisions about justice are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion; but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that'.[30]

Chomsky thus affirms the classical realist view that the international system is essentially anarchic (not to be confused with Chomsky's own normative commitment to *anarchism*, which will be discussed below) and that the basic principles of international relations have retained their validity across times and cultures. He strenuously rejects notions of American exceptionalism and the suggestion that US foreign policy has been motivated, or even significantly tempered, by such idealistic goals as the spread of democracy, commitment to international rule of law, and support of political freedom. The US must be judged not according to its public pronouncements but according to the same realistic standards regularly applied to other great powers and systems of imperialism throughout history, from British colonialism to Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere to the Soviet empire. 'No one would be disturbed by an analysis of the political behaviour of Russians, French or Tanzanians, questioning their motives and interpreting their actions in terms of long-range interests, perhaps well concealed behind official rhetoric', Chomsky writes. 'We are hardly the first power in history to combine material interests, great technological capacity, and an utter disregard for the

[27] The willingness of most people to obey orders from perceived authority figures, even to the point of inflicting brutality on strangers, Stanley Milgram observed in his classic psychological experiments, 'is embedded in a larger atmosphere where social relationships, career aspirations, and technical routines set the dominant tone. Typically, we do not find [. . .] a pathologically aggressive man ruthlessly exploiting a position of power, but a functionary who has been given a job to do and who strives to create an impression of competence in his work'. See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 187.

[28] Chomsky, *Understanding Power,* p. 268.

[29] Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*, p. xiii.

[30] Thucydides, *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature: Selections from The History of the Peloponnesian War*, (ed.), Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 104.

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suffering and misery of the lower orders'.[31] This does not imply that the US is a uniquely malevolent power in world history, but merely that it 'is behaving like every other power'. Today, 'The United States happens to be more powerful [than any other state] so it is, as you would expect, more violent ... [but] when the British were running the world, they were doing the same thing'.[32] The guiding principle 'is elementary': 'Norms are established by the powerful, in their own interests, and with the acclaim of responsible intellectuals. These may be close to historical universals. I have been looking for exceptions for many years. There are a few, but not many'.[33]

2. The normative turn

The preceding outline of Chomsky's politics fails to do justice to the astounding range of his work or the relentless accumulation of detail he has mustered to support his case, which has recently included trenchant critiques of 'humanitarian interventionism' in Kosovo and elsewhere in the post-Cold War period and the neo-liberal agendas of multilateral organisations such as the IMF and World Bank (which Chomsky sees as working largely at the behest of the US government).[34] It should serve to illustrate, though, that his understanding of power emerges from essentially realist assumptions. The point is not simply that realism is a very 'broad church' (to quote Barry Buzan)[35] that can tolerate even the likes of Chomsky somewhere on its outermost fringes; it is that Chomsky has insisted on a more rigorous and penetrating realism than many of the tradition's high priests have themselves allowed. 'In his principled focus on power, in diverse forms and places', Laffey writes, 'Chomsky is a more thorough-going and consistent realist than many who self-consciously claim the title'.[36] We are confronted in Chomsky's writings, then, by a fact that has so far been widely ignored by IR theorists and that challenges both conventional IR wisdom and the self-understandings of many political actors: the fact that the realist tradition also encompasses radical thinkers

[31] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, pp. 330–1; see also Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*, p. 221.

[32] Noam Chomsky, *Power and Terror: Post 9/11 Talks and Interviews* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), p. 119.

[33] Noam Chomsky, 'Simple Truths, Hard Problems: Some Thoughts on Terror, Justice, and Self-Defence', in *Philosophy*, 80:1 (January 2005), p. 5. Waltzian neo-realists might criticise these statements of Chomsky's on methodological grounds as reflecting a reductive 'second-image' level of analysis. It seems to this reader, though, that Chomsky explains structural and systemic aspects of international relations from the most logical perspective available, namely, on the assumption that the structural dynamics of any global order, in an anarchic world, will be dictated by the most powerful states. See Kenneth Waltz, 'Reductionist and Systemic Theories', in *Neorealism and its Critics*, pp. 47–69.

[34] See Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Story Press, 1998); and *A New Generation Draws the Line: Kosovo, East Timor and the Standards of the West* (New York: Verso, 2001).

[35] Barry Buzan, 'The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 62.

[36] Laffey, 'Discerning the Patterns of World Order: Noam Chomsky and International Theory After the Cold War', p. 595.

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on the political left who focus on dynamics of state power and who are sceptical of political ideologies that claim to transcend sheer power interests.

The question arises: Why is there so little discussion within IR studies of the fact of left instantiations of political realism, tracing back through the ideas of thinkers like Foucault, Carr, Marx, and Weber;[37] and why is Chomsky in particular not more widely recognised as a serious – in fact formidable – spokesman for this left realist tradition?[38] Chomsky remains a prophet without honour among his tribe, I will argue, for at least two clear reasons: first, he has rejected the dominant realist claim that the normative principles that apply to individuals do not apply to states, sharply criticising any 'realism' so defined and urging intellectuals to resist rather than serve state power interests; and second, he has refused to theorise. Chomsky's radical political ethics and intellectual commitments have consequently placed him in opposition to powerful interests not only within the realist camp but also within the broader discipline of international relations. If many of Chomsky's analytic claims are best grasped in terms of realist assumptions, attention to factors of power and elite control in this sense also goes far to explain his marginalisation within the field.

A. Chomsky contra Morgenthau: the politics of resistance

Chomsky's political ethics may perhaps best be approached by way of contrast alongside the ethics of Morgenthau, who also mounted a devastating critique of America's war in Vietnam but on pragmatic rather than principled grounds. The war in Vietnam, Morgenthau wrote in 1966, was built upon 'pretenses, double-talk and outright lies'. Chief among these was the claim that Washington's purpose in Vietnam was to 'protect the freedom of a people who want to be protected by us', when in reality Washington was attempting to impose a political order on a state that did not desire western interference. There 'is no such thing as a government in Saigon', Morgenthau declared, citing popular resistance to the corrupt, unpopular and brutal General Ky. The entire war was a waste of 'our human and material resources on a monstrous scale'. Further, there was a high risk that the war would escalate into a confrontation with China and the Soviet Union, the

[37] Laffey would include Nietzsche on this list as well. Yet while Nietzsche may have inspired Foucault and Weber in critical ways, attempts to appropriate Nietzsche himself as a left political thinker are deeply problematic. Nietzsche's politics, taken on their own terms, are marked by his nostalgia for aristocratic and exploitative social arrangements and his contempt for socialism and anarchism, no less than liberalism, for perpetuating what he saw as insipid Christian beliefs in shared human dignity and equality. Nietzsche is clearly a radical concerned with power. But whatever the utility of his ideas for some left thinkers, he remains, I would argue, a radical of the right. See also Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche contra Democracy* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[38] In October 2003, *Review of International Studies* broke long-standing silence about Chomsky by publishing a series of articles on the value of his work for the discipline. Most IR journals, however, continue to studiously avoid any discussion of his politics. Undue marginalisation of Chomsky by IR scholars is even more systematic, Lawrence Woods shows, in IR textbooks. See Lawrence T. Woods, "Where's Noam?: On the Absence of References to Noam Chomsky in Introductory International Studies Textbooks", in *New Political Science*, 28:1 (March 2006), pp. 65–79.

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outcome of which might well be nuclear holocaust over blind 'mythological' beliefs, ideological 'dogmas', and illusory threats.[39]

Even as Morgenthau condemned the war in these searing terms, however, he refused to pass judgment on the tactics and goals of policy-makers in language other than calculation of the 'national interest'. 'To the question as to whether we ought to take such a risk [of nuclear war], no *a priori* or negative answer can be given', he wrote. 'Rather the answer depends on the assessment of the stakes in terms of the national interest of the United States'. The national interest could be reduced to a single concern: 'if indeed the credibility of the United States and its prestige as a great power are at issue [...] then the risk of a direct military confrontation with China and the Soviet Union is worth taking'.[40] Prestige, Morgenthau declared, 'is really the decisive argument with which our policy stands or falls' – and there was nothing in principle that the state should refrain from doing to preserve its prestige:

> Nobody at home or abroad doubts our power to destroy the Viet Cong, be it even through genocide. Nor can anybody doubt our resolution to do so if this were to serve the interests at stake. What many Americans and an overwhelming majority of foreigners doubt is our wisdom in engaging our power and resolution in behalf of patently fictitious assumptions. Is our prestige better served by proving again and again what requires no further proof – that we have power and resolution – or by correcting policies that so many disinterested observers regard as being politically unwise, militarily unprofitable, and morally dubious?[41]

Morgenthau went on to urge his opponents in the Johnson administration to at least be as logically consistent as he was. 'If our waging war in Vietnam serves a vital national interest', he wrote, 'is it permissible to support this interest with less than wholehearted effort, let alone jeopardise it, in order to satisfy the aspirations for reform and mollify popular moods at home?' If the government proved 'unable to impose' the 'burdens of security' on 'the people', Morgenthau warned, 'America will not, and ought not to, remain a great power. A nation that refuses to accept the primacy of foreign policy over domestic politics has doomed itself'.[42] Within the moral calculus of normative, as opposed to analytical or descriptive realism, however, there are few grounds for condemning Morgenthau's perhaps inadvertent – at least theoretical, at last inexcusable – acceptance of acts so far as genocide ('if this were to serve the interests at stake'). If great powers not only *do* pursue power as a matter of fact, but *should* pursue power as a matter of principle, we are left, at best, with the judgment of Pericles: the highest civic virtue is to advance the cause of empire.[43] 'Pure realism', Carr observed, 'can offer nothing but a naked struggle for power which makes any kind of international society impossible'.[44]

Still, Morgenthau's morally ambiguous response to the war in Vietnam should not prevent IR scholars from discerning within his realism what William Scheuerman has described as 'subterranean critical tendencies': radical political affinities tracing back to his intellectual formation under the guidance of socialist

[39] Hans Morgenthau, 'Johnson's Dilemma: The Alternatives in Vietnam (1966)', in *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade, 1960–1970* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 398–9, 407, 422.
[40] Ibid., p. 402.
[41] Ibid., p. 404.
[42] Ibid., p. 424.
[43] Thucydides, *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature*, p. 55.
[44] Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 93.

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labour lawyer Hugo Sinzheimer.[45] Although Morgenthau became disillusioned with Sinzheimer's project after the collapse of the international order in the 1930s, Scheuerman argues, throughout his life he retained much of his early political idealism and a desire to defend the weak from the predations of the strong. Like Carr and Niebuhr, who similarly embraced socialist politics for many years, Morgenthau's 'scepticism about ambitious models of global governance derives at least in part from the traditional left-wing critique of formal law' and reveals the 'surprising nexus between left-wing politics and realism – often neglected by historians of international theory'.[46] Morgenthau's paradoxically radical yet self-consciously 'realist' critique of the Vietnam War exposed his (unsuccessful) struggle to reconcile his deeply humanistic values and attraction to left thought with his conviction following World War II that only power – and so arguments based upon the language of power – can possibly constrain the powerful.

Chomsky, while sharing much of Morgenthau's analysis of what was unfolding in Vietnam, opposed the war on very different grounds. The trouble with the war, he insisted, was not that it was a reckless adventure that was damaging to US interests, true as this might be, but that it was fundamentally unjust. It was not simply matters of cost, scale, and national interest that called into question the legitimacy of US actions, but the fact of US intervention itself. This idea, according to Chomsky, was unspeakable if not unthinkable among the 'responsible' policy strategists of every administration involved in the war, from Arthur Schlesinger to Robert McNamara to Henry Kissinger. The US, the planners accepted as a matter of self-evident truth, had 'the right to interfere in the internal affairs of others' provided interference could be shown to 'succeed without too great a cost'. Within the National Security Council, 'there is no one to express the view that the United States *should not* (rather than *cannot*) pacify Vietnam or secure the rule of the quisling regime it has instituted'.[47] But for Chomsky, the 'fundamental political axiom [. . .] that the United States has the right to extend its power and control without limit, insofar as is feasible' was morally and intellectually repugnant.[48] In contrast to Morgenthau, who compulsively explained to policy-makers why the annihilation of Vietnam would not serve US prestige, Chomsky declared that by even entering into 'the arena of argument and counterargument, of technical feasibility and tactics [. . .] by accepting the legitimacy of debate on certain issues, one has already lost one's humanity'. '[W]hat we have done in Vietnam is wrong, a criminal act', he wrote in 1967, so 'that an American "victory" would have been a tragedy'. The war 'is simply an obscenity, a depraved act by weak and miserable men, including all of us, who have allowed it to go on and on with endless fury and destruction – all of us who would have remained silent had stability and order been secured'.[49]

Chomsky's insistence that the actions of states be judged not according to goals of power or prestige but according to values of justice and human rights does not compromise his analytical realism, although it clearly sets him apart from realists in the 'Kissingerian' mould and connects his normative commitments with the

[45] William E. Scheuerman, 'Realism and the Left: The Case of Hans J. Morgenthau', *Review of International Studies*, 34:1 (January 2008), pp. 29–51.
[46] Ibid., p. 49–50.
[47] Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*, pp. xxxv, xxviii.
[48] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins,* p. 333.
[49] Ibid., pp. 9–11.

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ideals of classical liberalism.[50] For Morgenthau, 'in the context of foreign policy, lying is inevitable [. . .] if you do not accept the principle that this is *homo homini lupus*, one man is to another like a wolf, then you will not survive'. Hence, 'what is morally condemned in individual relations isn't necessarily morally condemned in relations of states'.[51] Chomsky, by contrast, declares that states, like individuals, should minimally follow the ethic of the Hippocratic oath: Do no harm. If a state cannot achieve its goals without resorting to such tactics as lying, defoliation, free fire zones, forced population removals, assassinations, torture, and napalm, it should simply not pursue its goals. Actions that are recognised as pathological and criminal among ordinary citizens should be viewed in precisely the same light when enacted by elites in power. Further, a nation's ends must be morally evaluated in the light of its means. Brutality, lying, and aggression do not simply corrupt one's goals, as Stanley Hoffmann argued in the case of Vietnam – they reveal one's goals for what they actually are.[52]

To the extent, then, that brutality, lying, and aggression by the state as we know it are 'inevitable' as Morgenthau says (and Chomsky agrees), the only ethical path open to the individual is clear: challenge authority; resist the state. Resisting the state in Chomsky's politics does not imply resorting to acts of violence, which he sees as being both pragmatically and morally indefensible in almost all cases.[53] 'As a tactic, violence is absurd', he wrote in opposition to groups advocating use of force against the government during the Vietnam period. 'No one can compete with the government in this arena, and the resort to violence, which will surely fail, will simply [. . .] further encourage the ideologists and administrators of forceful repression'.[54] Rather, Chomsky urges tactics of conscientious objection and principled nonconformity with state power. 'My own feeling is that one should refuse to participate in any activity that implements American aggression', Chomsky wrote in reply to a letter from George Steiner during the Vietnam War, 'thus tax refusal, draft refusal, avoidance of work that can be used by the agencies of militarism and repression, all seem to me essential. I can't suggest a general formula. Detailed decisions have to be matters of personal judgment and conscience'.[55] Principled resistance to the state, according to Chomsky, should

[50] Chomsky's use of inverted quotation marks when discussing proponents of 'Kissingerian realism' should signal to careful readers that he is critiquing not realist analysis as such but what he sees as mendacious use of language, the word realism itself often being employed by state actors as a euphemistic mask for the raw exercise of power. See, for example, Noam Chomsky, 'Indonesia, master card in Washington's hand', in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 1998, on the web at: http://mondediplo.com/1998/06/02chomsky.

[51] Hans Morgenthau, *Human Rights and Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1979), pp. 10–11.

[52] Stanley Hoffmann with reply by Noam Chomsky, 'The Ethics of Intervention', in *The New York Review of Books*, 12:6 (27 March 1969), on the web at: http://www.nybooks.com/articles/11370.

[53] Chomsky accepts the basic tenets of just war theory and so allows that violence might in some situations be morally defensible, 'But the use of violence [. . .] can only be justified on the basis of the claim and the assessment – which always ought to be undertaken very, very seriously and with a good deal of scepticism – that this violence is being exercised because a more just result is going to be achieved'. See Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, 'Human Nature: Justice Versus Power', in Fons Elders, (ed.), *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), pp. 183–4.

[54] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, pp. 374–375.

[55] George Steiner with reply by Noam Chomsky, 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals: An Exchange', in *The New York Review of Books*, 8:5 (23 March 1967), on the web at: http://www.nybooks.com/articles/12148

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always emerge from individual creativity, spontaneity, and conscience rather than from programmatic formulas or the manipulation of individuals in the name of higher goals. 'We must [. . .] be careful not to construct situations in which young people will find themselves induced, perhaps in violation of their basic convictions, to commit civil disobedience. Resistance must be freely undertaken'.[56]

It goes without saying that these anarchist conclusions will not be warmly received by most international relations theorists, whether liberal or realist, who have been anxious to justify their discipline by insisting on its usefulness to policy-makers. The historical roots of IR theory lie precisely in the techniques and lessons of statecraft, and the field remains deeply entwined with the concerns and interests of political elites. IR scholars – particularly in the US – move smoothly from professorships in the universities into managerial and technocratic roles in government, and back again. During the Vietnam era, intellectuals in general, and social scientists in particular, demonstrated a 'willing subservience [. . .] to state power', helping to design counterinsurgency techniques and to produce an abundance of political, regional, psychological, and strategic studies for government and military contractors.[57] Much of the funding for political science and IR departments continues to come from either state or corporate sources, with economic realities dictating research agendas and parameters for debate. The goal, as in the Napoleonic conception of the *Lycée*, is not to foster voices of conscience but to produce competent administrators to fill required roles in existing state and economic structures.[58] This widespread willingness of political theorists in the US 'to place their science at the service of government, military, and business', Michael Parenti observes, has rested 'on the unexamined value assumption that the overall politico economic system was essentially a benign one'.[59]

For Chomsky, however, political realism exposes the assumption that the American system is benign to be a dangerous and enervating chimera. Political realism thus also reveals the fact that intellectuals – contrary to their self-perceptions – have widely served as conformist promoters of unjustified power and privilege. Throughout history, there have always been two kinds of political thinkers, Chomsky writes, not 'idealists' and 'realists', as textbook IR typologies suggest, but what in the former Soviet Union were known as the apparatchiks and the refuseniks, the commissars and the dissidents.[60] The rewards to the commissars for colluding with power are great, and the penalties for dissent real – but the burden of dissent remains. 'It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies'.[61] A realistic assessment of power relations within the discipline therefore suggests that the primary reason Chomsky's realism has not been more widely recognised and discussed by IR scholars has less to do with political theory as such than with the politics *of* theory. Even Morgenthau faced marginalisation and recrimination once he began to press his realist logic in the direction of a more

[56] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 385.
[57] Chomsky, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 69–76.
[58] See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), pp. 348–349.
[59] Michael Parenti, 'Patricians, Professionals, and Political Science', in *American Political Science Review*, 100:4 (November 2006), p. 503.
[60] Noam Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), p. 62.
[61] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* p. 325.

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radical interpretation of US foreign policy.[62] It is hardly surprising that Chomsky's uncompromising anarchist critique of the state, for many within the field, places him beyond the pale by this fact alone – no matter the highly relevant and carefully documented factual information he has presented over the past four decades. The integration of US universities 'into the US corporate-government nexus' means that 'anti-elite' views such as Chomsky's that fall outside certain ideological boundaries will be systematically dismissed, misrepresented, or ignored.[63]

B. Chomsky contra Power: evidential critiques and the case of East Timor

Some scholars have alternatively sought to explain hostility to Chomsky on what Edgley calls 'evidential' grounds, namely, by combing his many volumes of political writings for factual mistakes that might discredit his project.[64] Chomsky has been accused of moral and intellectual failings ranging from anti-Semitism to selective use of quotations to denial of genocide in Cambodia. But while mistakes may be found in his work, evidential critiques of Chomsky have so far failed to respond to the broad picture he presents, largely from official sources, of the operative principles behind US foreign policy. Worse still, Eric Herring and Piers Robinson conclude, what critical references to Chomsky that may be found in IR literature are typically marked by 'ignorance and misrepresentation'.[65] Although his work is 'sometimes weakened by overstatement', historian Walter LaFebber writes, 'Chomsky is instructive about the present and the future because he is serious about the past [. . .] And he is deadly serious about the use of evidence'.[66] Evidential accounts of hostility to Chomsky also fail to explain why his writings are subjected to such antipathetic scrutiny in the first place. The most logical answer is that it is Chomsky's radical left politics that provoke unusual resistance to the factual data he presents rather than the other way around.

An example of the kind of critique of Chomsky careful scholars will avoid may be found in the work of Samantha Power, who has charged Chomsky with perpetuating a kind of Manichean distortion of history. 'For Chomsky, the world is divided into oppressor and oppressed. America, the prime oppressor, can do no right, while the sins of those categorised as oppressed receive scant mention', she writes. 'Thus the billions of dollars in foreign aid [. . .] and the interventions in

[62] See Robert J. Myers, 'An Approximation of Justice', in Kenneth Thompson and Robert J. Myers (eds), *Truth and Tragedy: A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau*, (Transaction Publishers, 1984), pp. 126–9; and Jennifer See, 'A Prophet without Honor: Hans Morgenthau and the War in Vietnam, 1955–1965', in *The Pacific Historical Review*, 70:3 (August 2001), pp. 419–47.

[63] Eric Herring and Piers Robinson, 'Too polemical or too critical?: Chomsky on the study of the news media and US foreign policy', in *Review of International Studies*, 29:4 (October 2003), pp. 562–3.

[64] Alison Edgley, 'Chomsky's Political Critique: Essentialism and Political Theory', in *Contemporary Political Theory*, 4:2 (May 2005), p. 130–1.

[65] Herring and Robinson, 'Chomsky Forum' and 'Too polemical or too critical?: Chomsky on the study of the news media and US foreign policy', pp. 551–2, 568; see also Robert Barsky, *Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 170–191; and Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*, pp. 27–30,131–4.

[66] Walter LaFeber, 'Whose News?', in *The New York Times* (6 November 1988), p. BR27; and LaFeber as cited in Laffey, 'Discerning the Patterns of World Order', p. 598.

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Kosovo and East Timor [. . .] have to be explained away'.[67] Power's reference to East Timor unfortunately raises troubling questions not about Chomsky's work but about Power's own project, which may be situated within the school of liberal internationalism. Power has written extensively and insightfully about Washington's sins of omission in the face of human rights atrocities, emphasising the passivity and bureaucratic inertia that prevented US leaders from intervening in places like Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Yet conspicuously absent from Power's writings are precisely countries like East Timor, which is mentioned in a single sentence in her Pulitzer Prize-winning study of US foreign policy and genocide. While the Indonesian Army slaughtered as many as 200,000 people during its 1975 invasion of oil-rich East Timor, Power writes, 'the United States looked away'.[68]

In point of fact, Chomsky has documented in great detail (and as early as 1980, when few scholars in North America knew where East Timor was), the US did not 'look away' or 'fail to act' in the face of genocidal massacres in the country. Rather, it carefully weighed its interests and took decisive action. The invasion of East Timor was launched within hours of a visit by President Ford and Henry Kissinger to General Suharto in Jakarta, during which they gave the anti-communist dictator an explicit 'green light' for the attack.[69] Ninety per cent of the Indonesian Army's weapons were supplied by the US, with secret arms shipments being delivered even as the massacres intensified.[70] It was only as a result of sustained pressure over many years from human rights groups such as the East Timor Action Network, Chomsky documents, that Congress passed legislation in 1992 banning military training of Indonesian officers involved in the ongoing atrocities – legislation the State Department immediately circumvented.[71] Nor is it difficult, in realist perspective, to demonstrate how US humanitarian aid is used in highly selective and even coercive ways to advance US self-interests.[72] Power's charge that Chomsky has 'explained away' foreign aid and unspecified historical evidence from East Timor that undermines his reading of the US as an aggressive imperial power therefore cannot be sustained.

Chomsky has also offered a cogent explanation for why he focuses on the US and relatively unknown atrocities such as those committed in East Timor that

[67] Samantha Power, 'The Everything Explainer', in *The New York Times* (4 January 2004), p. 8.
[68] Samantha Power, *'A Problem from Hell': America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. 146–147.
[69] 'You appreciate that the use of US-made arms could create a problem', recently declassified transcripts of the 6 December 1975 meeting record Kissinger warning Suharto. 'It depends on how we construe it; whether it is in self-defense or is a foreign operation. It is important that whatever you do succeeds quickly. We would be able to influence the reaction in America if whatever happens happens after we return. This way there would be less chance of people talking in an unauthorized way [. . .] We understand your problem and the need to move quickly [. . .] Whatever you do, however, we will try to handle in the best way possible [. . .] If you have made plans, we will do our best to keep everyone quiet until the President returns home'. See Ben Kiernan, 'Cover-Up and Denial of Genocide: Australia, the USA, East Timor, and the Aborigines', in *Critical Asian Studies*, 34:2 (June 2002), p. 170; and William Burr and Michael Evans, (eds), 'East Timor: Ford, Kissinger and the Indonesian Invasion, 1975–76', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No.62 (2001) on the web at: http://www.gwu.edu/%7Ensarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB62/doc4.pdf.
[70] Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War*, pp. 358–92.
[71] Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, p. 297.
[72] See Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 84–90, 224; and David Sogge, *Give and Take: What's the Matter with Foreign Aid?* (London: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 40–65.

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involve a 'Washington connection' rather than on well-established crimes perpetrated by the Soviet Union and regimes like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. It is not, as Power suggests, because the US 'can do no right' in Chomsky's eyes while other states can do little wrong. It is because the 'responsibility of the writer as a *moral agent* is to try to bring truth about *matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.*'[73] It takes no courage, and is of little consequence, Chomsky points out, when intellectuals expose the sins of states other than their own. Hence, a Soviet intellectual would merit no particular praise for condemning US imperialism in Vietnam while remaining silent about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Conversely, intellectuals in the West bear a particular responsibility to expose the actions of Western leaders, both because they have unique freedoms and access to information in the West that others do not have, and because doing so might actually arouse the public and stop the powerful from continuing to enact oppressive policies.[74]

C. Rationalism, human nature and the limits of social theory

Chomsky's focus on normative questions of justice, reason, truthfulness, and human rights sets him apart not only from most self-described realists, however; it distinguishes him from many intellectuals on the political left who view appeals to categories of morality, truth, and human nature with deep suspicion as oppressive 'essentialist' categories. 'Justice' and 'reason', Foucault argued in a 1971 television debate with Chomsky, are best conceived as masks, as 'weapons' fabricated by the oppressed out of resentment to achieve their own power ends.[75] Yet the post-modern claim that all argumentation, whether moral or rational, is ultimately reducible to subjective negotiations for power is itself open to rational scrutiny. If it is an objective statement, it contradicts its own premises; if it is a subjective statement, then by hypothesis it cannot refute the reply that it is objectively false.[76] Chomsky, who sees himself as standing in the humanistic and Enlightenment tradition of Descartes, Rousseau, and Wilhelm von Humbolt, rejects Foucault's position, insisting on the necessity of both reason and universal values for any progressive political order. 'I think there is some sort of an absolute basis ... ultimately residing in fundamental human qualities, in terms of which a "real" notion of justice is grounded', he replied to Foucault. '[J]ustice and decency and love and kindness and sympathy' may be difficult to define or to prove but are nevertheless 'real'.[77] Chomsky concedes that the language of values he embraces may be based more upon 'structures of hope and conviction rather than arguments

[73] Chomsky as cited in Smith, *Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals*, p. 194.
[74] Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War*, pp. 10–11.
[75] Chomsky and Foucault, 'Human Nature: Justice Versus Power', pp. 183ff. Foucault may elsewhere offer a more complex (or perhaps contradictory) view of questions of human nature, reason, and justice, but in his debate with Chomsky he clearly takes a radically relativist (and essentially Nietzschean) position on moral/political questions. See also Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', in *Political Theory,* 12:2 (May 1984), pp. 152–83.
[76] Smith, *Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals*, p. 181.
[77] Chomsky and Foucault, 'Human Nature: Justice Versus Power', p. 185; see also Chomsky, *Understanding Power,* p. 361.

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with evidence', but he declares that it is only a commitment to truth and justice as realities that are found rather than merely fabricated that offers 'any moral content to our advocacy and action'.[78] It is in fact the alternative, reductive view – implicit in behaviouralist and positivist political theories – that leads to tyranny and oppression; if the mind and morality are plastic and humans are merely the sum of their material conditions, there are no barriers against coercion, control, manipulation, and domination by the self-styled social engineers, whether of the left or the right.[79]

The very idea of a 'theory' in the social sciences is therefore highly suspect in Chomsky's politics and must be critically examined in the light of power dynamics within the academy, as well as the status anxiety of social scientists relative to natural ones. Philosophically, Chomsky is a rationalist as opposed to an empiricist; he does not gather and manipulate empirical facts using experimental methods in order to arrive at general conclusions (although his work is grounded in a wealth of empirical data and exposes the weak empirical foundations of much IR theory), but assumes that empirical phenomenon in the social world are the result of an order of relationships or principles that may be hidden but are substantially 'given' and will become transparent once brought to light.[80] 'In the analysis of social and political issues it is sufficient to face the facts and to be willing to follow a rational line of argument', Chomsky declares. 'Only Cartesian common sense, which is quite evenly distributed, is needed [. . .] if by that you understand the willingness to look at the facts with an open mind, to put simple assumptions to the test, and to pursue an argument to its conclusion'.[81]

Unfortunately, Chomsky's critique of obfuscating theoretical language in the academy has at times been unnecessarily sweeping and harsh. Linguistic posturing, he writes, has allowed 'experts' 'to imitate the surface features of sciences that really have significant intellectual content'. Yet for people genuinely concerned with 'moral issues and human rights, or over the traditional problems of man and society [. . .] "social and behavioral science" has nothing to offer beyond trivialities'.[82] '[I]f by theory we mean something with principles which are not obvious when you first look at them, and from which you can deduce surprising consequences and try to confirm the principles – you're not going to find anything like that in the social world'.[83] There are no useful social or political ideas, according to Chomsky, that can't be explained at the level a high school student would understand – including his own. Chomsky's view of Marxism is illustrative of his dismissive attitude toward political theory in general. Marx, he asserts, 'introduced some interesting concepts . . . notions like class, and relations of production' (which Chomsky freely uses), but Marxism is 'an irrational cult' that

[78] Chomsky as cited in Milan Rai, 'Market Values and Libertarian Socialist Values', in James McGilvray (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Chomsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 227.
[79] Noam Chomsky, *On Language: Chomsky's Classic Works* Language and Responsibility *and* Reflections on Language *in One Volume* (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 88–91; and McGilvray, *Chomsky,* p. 17.
[80] Laffey, 'Discerning the Patterns of World Order', pp. 599–600; and McGilvray, *Chomsky: Language, Mind, and Politics*, pp. 244–5.
[81] Chomsky, *On Language*, p. 5.
[82] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 339.
[83] Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, pp. 229.

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belongs 'to the history of organized religion'. 'I'm not saying that [dialectics] doesn't have any meaning – you observe people using the term and they look like they're communicating. But it's like when I watch people talking Turkish: something's going on, but I'm not part of it'.[84]

With IR theory since the 1960s moving in the direction of higher and higher levels of abstraction and sophistication, Chomsky's politics are therefore doubly subversive and unwelcome within the field; he holds not only radically different political but disciplinary commitments as well. The 'disciplinary identity' of IR, especially in the US, J. Ann Tickner points out, has largely involved scholars adapting positivist and empiricist methodologies and epistemological assumptions to the regulation of international behaviour.[85] Chomsky poses a challenge to IR theorists by calling into question their unexamined role in helping to manage rather than resist state power. Further, he subversively undermines much IR scholarship in its vacuous pretensions to 'scientific' status. In the process, however, he needlessly exposes himself to the charge that the reason IR theorists do not pay more attention to his work is because, by his own admission, he has made no attempt to advance an IR theory – and has little time for those who do. His rejection of 'theory', both Laffey and Edgley argue, even if defensible on its own terms, alienates potential allies, obscures the actual and unavoidable theoretical content of his writings, and ironically makes it more rather than less difficult for scholars to understand his project or situate his ideas within the discipline.[86]

3. Conclusions

Chomsky has few utopian illusions as to what his brand of opposition to power might achieve. His anarchist politics seem to require a stoic resolve in the face of overwhelming institutional pressures and grim historical realities. There are 'long-term tendencies that threaten the hegemony of coercive institutions and ideologies [. . .] I know of no concrete and substantive programs for bringing about badly needed and technically feasible social change'.[87] The social ferment of the 1960s, Chomsky feared, would quite possibly lead nowhere, with 'limited wars' continuing to be fought overseas to preserve US power, 'supported by an apathetic, obedient majority, its mind and conscience dulled by a surfeit of commodities and by some new version of the old system of beliefs and ideas'.[88] Nevertheless, he believes, human beings, as free moral agents, can make a difference, and must try to make a difference, whether or not they succeed. '[W]hile I expect that any worthwhile cause will achieve at best very limited success, and will quite probably largely fail, nevertheless there are accomplishments that give much satisfaction, however small they may be in the face of what one would like

[84] Ibid., pp. 227–9.
[85] J. Ann Tickner, 'Gendering a Discipline: Some Feminist Methodological Contributions to International Relations', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30:4 (Winter 2005), pp. 2174–6.
[86] See Laffey, 'Discerning the Patterns of World Order', p. 603; Edgley, 'Chomsky's Political Critique', pp. 130ff; and Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky*, pp. 180–4.
[87] Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*, p. xli.
[88] Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 5.

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to see'.[89] We must assume that there are grounds for hope in human freedom and creativity, Chomsky argues in a reformulation of Pascal's wager in the existence of God, because this offers the only chance for a better world, while to abandon hope is to 'guarantee that there will be no hope'.[90]

Like Albert Camus, Chomsky's outlook might therefore be described as 'pessimistic as to human destiny, optimistic as to man'.[91] His politics, Edgley shows, emerge from a 'militant optimism' about human nature.[92] Unlike Niebuhr and Morgenthau, whose realism included claims about human 'fallenness' or innate aggressiveness, Chomsky refuses to accept that violence and injustice are necessary or inescapable facts of the human condition.[93] But while Chomsky remains militantly optimistic with regard to human nature, his analysis of the trajectory of human history and existing power structures also contains an urgency that is often literally apocalyptic in tone. The danger posed by US economic and military policies, he declares, 'has reached the level of a threat to human survival'.[94] The human race is 'likely' to 'self-destruct'.[95] In January of 2002, in the week before the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Chomsky was asked in an interview whether the terms 'optimism' and 'pessimism' 'make any sense'. He responded by quoting from Antonio Gramsci: 'we should have "pessimism of the intellect, and optimism of the will." The concepts definitely make sense, and I think that is how we should use them'.[96]

Chomsky's claim to be a 'pessimist of the intellect and optimist of the will' highlights the fact that his thinking often defies easy categorisation and straddles widely assumed dichotomies in social and political theory. On the normative side of his politics, he has emphasised the importance of human agency, individual responsibility and creativity, and libertarian socialist values, which he sees as being logical extensions of rationalist and classical liberal thought. Yet analytically, Chomsky has focused on structural, systemic, and institutional aspects of state power, attempting to expose uncomfortable realities of self-interest, violence and coercion beneath the surface of the international order and even at the heart of liberal democracies. It is Chomsky's analytical framework – his 'pessimism of the intellect' – that I have described as *realist* at its core.

There are two principle objections to such a reading of Chomsky's politics. According to Edgley, Chomsky cannot be a realist in international affairs because: 1) he does not see the state as the only 'root of social dynamics'; and 2) he rejects 'the Hobbesian view that states are a means for peace'.[97] Yet Edgley elsewhere observes that Chomsky's 'whole analysis of current events in society revolves around the state and its proactive character. The state is the key player that makes

[89] Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), pp. 13–14, 55; and Chomsky as cited in Barsky, *Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*, p. 212.
[90] Chomsky as cited in Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*, p. 58.
[91] Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1961), p. 73.
[92] Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky,* pp. 180ff.
[93] Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, C.P. Otero (ed.), (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 106–7.
[94] Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), p. 231
[95] Chomsky, *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, p. 391.
[96] 'Preparatory to Porto Alegre: Chomsky interviewed by various interviewers', January 2002, on the web at: http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/200201–.htm
[97] Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky*, pp. 108–11.

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it all happen'.[98] As a matter of emphasis, by Edgley's own account, Chomsky thus clearly stands in the realist tradition of treating states as the primary units of analysis in international relations. What, then, of Edgley's second objection? Does a realist analytic framework lead, as a matter of logical necessity, to acceptance of the state as the best means for peace? Does the word 'realism' by definition imply a 'pragmatic' political ethic (such as Morgenthau's) and so a commitment to the maintenance of structures of state power, whether as positive goods or necessary evils? Chomsky's own view is that the realist reading of his politics I have presented is both 'persuasive and illuminating'. Perhaps the strongest argument in support of the claim that a principled anarchist can simultaneously be a realist in international relations is therefore the fact that Chomsky himself welcomes this conclusion:

> I suppose one might argue that 'realism' includes the principle that states are not subject to ethical judgment, and therefore my critique of state action is not 'realist'. But that's hardly convincing. True, states are abstractions, and abstractions are not moral agents. But those who set state policy are moral agents, and their actions are therefore subject to moral judgment and critique. It seems to me that when issues are clarified, 'left realism' – or perhaps more accurately, realism that accepts fundamental moral principles, such as the principle of universality – is a concept that makes perfect sense. I also do not see any reason why anarchists should object to 'realist' analysis of state action. In fact they should welcome it.[99]

The question we are left with, then, is: If Chomsky welcomes appraisal of his politics in realist terms, and if such appraisal helps to clarify and situate his project within the field of IR studies, will IR scholars for their part welcome a reappraisal of the disciplinary boundaries of the realist tradition conventionally defined? Critical discussion of Chomsky can only occur, Herring and Robinson write, once social scientists begin to wrestle more seriously than they so far have with their own relationship to elite power. 'The challenge contained here for critical scholars is to reflect on and cease to carry out their often unwitting role in marking out the boundary of legitimate analysis'.[100] A realist reading of Chomsky in this sense helps not only to explain the politics of an important public intellectual but also to focus attention on an important question for IR studies: How are disciplinary boundaries created, sustained, and defended – and in whose interests?

[98] Ibid., pp. 50,87.
[99] Noam Chomsky, letter to the author (13 August 2007).
[100] Herring and Robinson, 'Too polemical or too critical?: Chomsky on the study of the news media and US foreign policy', p. 563.

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