
Book Reviews

David Armitage*

Noam Chomsky, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, London: Verso (April 1993). Paperback £11.95/Hardback £34.95

1993 marks what Noam Chomsky has called “Year 501”, another year in the Old World Order inaugurated by Christopher Columbus’s first voyage, yet prolonged even now by his ideological successors in the governments, industries, secret services and financial institutions of the world’s “developed” countries. In Chomsky’s clear-eyed and at times satirical exposition of the “continuing conquest,” the ironic ambiguity of George Bush’s “New World Order” is laid bare. The supposed victory of the free market and democracy in the titanic struggle of the Cold War, and the space thereby opened up for international exchange under the friendly superintendence of the United Nations, the World Bank and the G7 nations, has turned increasingly sour and pyrrhic. The reshaping of politics since 1989 has revealed not the utopian possibility of a new order for the world, but rather an old order in which the Anglo-

phone New World can cast a cloak of institutional respectability over its two-hundred-year enterprise of international dominance.

Such at least would be one unprejudiced way to recast Chomsky’s central argument in terms which show its sharply-aimed contribution to a particularly North American set of anxieties. For a quarter of a century, Chomsky has been the chiding Cassandra of American politics: *Year 501* is only the latest engagement in his continuing campaign against the foreign policy adopted by American governments of all stripes and the media which supports it by underinforming if not misinforming its public. The book is packed with trenchant commentary on the costs of that policy for all but the wealthy international elites, but its contingent aim seems to be less to give comfort to those on the receiving end of US military and economic policy than to call American policy-makers to account – and to conscience – for their actions. What makes his voice so powerful against the consensus of media and government is, however, the passionate reasonableness with which he attacks his chosen targets. These targets may often

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Columbia University.

mean little to European readers, who may not care greatly about the persistently contentious issue of American POW/MIAs in Vietnam for example, but the larger economic and political argument within which they are framed is a globally urgent one.

Yet Chomsky's argument is not solely intended to tear the scales from the American public's eyes, effective though it is in doing that. It also consciously participates in a great body of anti-imperialist writing which includes the religious protests of Bartolomé de Las Casas against Spanish slaughter of American Indians, Adam Smith's critical accounting of the costs of the British Empire in *The Wealth of Nations*, Mark Twain's ironic counterblasts to the propaganda of the Spanish-American War of 1898, and J A Hobson's moral and economic demolition of the high British Empire in his classic analysis, *Imperialism*. Chomsky blends the moral passion of Las Casas with the devastating satire of Twain, but nevertheless fails to produce a systematic treatise to set alongside Smith or Hobson. Chomsky's consciousness that he is writing against the ambitions of the United States within such a tradition is simultaneously the book's greatest strength and its most telling weakness. To take Columbus as a starting-point and the European merchant empires of the seventeenth century as a parallel should be a commendable means of contextualising Chomsky's polemic; instead it tends to overdetermine his narrative

and effectively makes late-medieval Catholicism and contemporary neo-liberalism (Chomsky's greatest bugbear) as indistinguishable in their motivations as in their effects. In the end this means that many of Chomsky's arguments become as mon-causal and hence undeniable as the ideological strains which he is attacking. For example, is American amnesia about the long-term effects of the Vietnam War on Vietnam itself solely the product of the state's need to defang criticism of its past actions (as Chomsky argues), or the symptom of a larger moral confusion about the War which in all good conscience most Americans might wish had never happened?

Such criticisms do not diminish the moral force of Chomsky's book, which leaves one in no doubt of the costs of economic and military conquest, often enacted, more frequently encouraged, by the countries of the North against their victims in the South. The broad canvas of political debate, historical detail, and human consequence which Chomsky spreads is quite properly the background to any argument – legal, political, aesthetic, or economic – about cultural property. In particular, the book gives the reader a crash-course in a diverse body of political and historical material, particularly on Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia, which is hardly available in so lucid or so passionate a summary elsewhere. It ultimately fails as a polemic because it presents no concep-

tion of how a neo-liberal world order might be overturned, how the benefits of a global economy might be maximised for the good of all, nor how an imperial self-interest seemingly as old as political communities themselves could ever be abandoned. However, the book already reads as a tract for a particular set of passing times which coincided with the end of the Reagan and Bush administrations, and the Columbian Quincentenary of 1992. With

the passing of each of these moments, we may question whether it will ever be possible to gain sufficient information about the acts and intentions of our rulers without a Chomsky to do it for us. Yet we can also hope – perhaps increasingly faintly – that our histories may not be as determined by our pasts as Chomsky fears, so that Year 501 might mark an era of new contingencies and not just the latest opportunity for old compulsions.