

**H**opes and Prospects, the latest contribution to Noam Chomsky's lengthy bibliography, is a collection of essays and talks delivered or published between 2006 and 2009, all of which have been revised and updated to incorporate developments up to early 2010. The first section deals with Latin America, the second with North America, but the work is thematically bound together by several recurring and overlapping discussions: the economic wars conducted by the United States, and the threat posed by its continued dominance of the global financial system; the threat of nuclear weapons; the manipulation of US client states, particularly Israel, to further US strategic interests; and the continued economic and political violence wrought against Latin America by its Northern counterpart. The book presents a bleak outlook, though it is not misleadingly titled: Chomsky sees the emergence of popular movements in Latin America and the possibility of "meaningful democracy" in the region as giving hope to similar movements worldwide. Sadly, these hopes are greatly outnumbered by the number of wrongdoings, hypocrisies and outright lies that Chomsky lays at America's door.

Regular readers of Chomsky will be familiar with his writing; his brusque, forceful prose combines historical narrative, contemporary criticism and reflective asides seemingly all at once. The most striking passages in *Hopes and Prospects* are those in which Chomsky exhibits incredulity at the brash cynicism of American leaders. Reflecting on President Obama's comment that he did not regard President Mubarak of Egypt as an authoritarian leader, Chomsky remarks that: "Obama is right . . . the word 'authoritarian' . . . is far too mild a label for his friend". More than that, Obama conducts himself in the Middle East in a manner that "surpasses cynicism", wilfully omitting "crucial facts" that stand in the way of America's interests. For Chomsky, "there should be little difficulty in understanding why those whose eyes are not closed tight shut by rigid doctrine dismiss Obama's yearning for human rights and democracy as a joke in bad taste". Chomsky portrays senior leaders in the Bush administration as hypocrites of the lowest order, declaring their intentions to bring democracy to Iraq, while demanding that Turkey ignore the majority vote against participating in the invasion: "[Paul] Wolfowitz was the most outraged. He . . . demanded that Turkey apologize and recognize that it is their responsibility to help America, whatever their ridiculous population believes". In *Hopes and Prospects* Chomsky repeatedly returns to the troubling notion that a strong contempt for democracy exists among those who hold themselves to be its greatest advocates. He also believes that financial liberalization and the privatization of services threatens the viability of democracy: "with services privatized, democratic institutions may exist, but they will be mostly formalities because the most important decisions . . . will have been removed from the public arena". Chomsky views the belief that present-day America is somehow different from the rapacious European empires that brought destruction to the indigenous populations of the Americas as a delusion, one created through wilful ignorance, or outright dismissal of readily available facts. If there were any sense in which America could be said to be immoral, this would be it:

JONATHAN PEARSON

Noam Chomsky

HOPES AND PROSPECTS

336pp. Hamish Hamilton. £18.99.

978 0 241 14475 6

US: Haymarket Books: Paperback, \$16.

978 1 931859 96 7

Alasdair Roberts

THE LOGIC OF DISCIPLINE

216pp. Oxford University Press. £22.50 (US \$35).

978 0 19 537498 8

certain abstracts (namely the "august character of the US") are raised to a level of "pure logic", while empirical historical facts that give the lie to that notion are dismissed as an "abuse of reality". Immorality here stems, not from the actions themselves, but from the context in which they are justified, one where "the actual facts of history are irrelevant".

Such is the conviction with which Chomsky moves from one point to the next that it is difficult not to be swept into his grip. It is the zealous manner in which he approaches his subject matter that turns many people off his work, and in some sense lessens its impact. It is hard not to feel, reflecting on this book, that Chomsky's sense that much has been lost and little has been gained since Europeans began colonizing the globe is simply too absolute. Chomsky makes no concessions, nor admits of alternative explanations. Nevertheless, his is an important and challenging voice. It should be acknowledged that morality and values are often subservient to economics, that free trade and liberalization can be as much a tool of oppression as of freedom, and that major powers cynically spout barely disguised hypocrisies to justify their actions. It is, however, difficult to believe that this is universally the case.

Alasdair Roberts, Professor of Law and Public Policy at Suffolk University in Boston, shares Chomsky's view that democracy is undermined by financial liberalization. In his new work, *The Logic of Discipline*, Roberts presents the idea that the reforms conducted during the "era of liberalization" (for him, the thirty-year period beginning in 1978 and ending in 2008) were designed to insulate certain state functions, primarily those associated with continued financial stability, from the caprice and short-sightedness of the democratic process. Scepticism about the ability of democracy to make the disciplined, rational choices thought to be essential to the security of the new globalized economy galvanized an intellectual movement that prized stability, consistency and far-sightedness. In short, in order to protect the fledgling globalized economy, undisciplined voters and politicians were to be sidelined in favour of disciplined technocrats. The "logic of discipline", as Roberts calls it, inspired the creation of an array of defences against the "vagaries" of democracy. Discipline found its institutional expression in the creation of independent central banks, independent regulatory agencies, the transfer of authority from governments to private industry and

# Empire lines



Dublin, November 2010

the emergence of fiscal rules designed to "restrain the sovereignty of democratic institutions". Unlike Chomsky, Roberts declines to take a moral position, choosing instead to criticize these reforms by dispassionately dismantling the arguments presented to justify them. The world of discipline is staunchly amoral; here objectivity and efficiency always trump fickle notions of "right and wrong".

Roberts's account of how discipline came to dominate the reform agenda and subsequently came undone finds its most coherent expression in his account of the formation of independent central banks. Created to ensure that unpopular anti-inflationary policies could survive in the face of public and political dissent, these banks came to represent "a sort of Maginot line: a massive structure that was heavily fortified against the wrong threat". With all other functions subordinated to the process of keeping inflation under control, independent central banks were incapable of dealing with new threats, in this instance controlling the unsustainable asset bubbles that caused the financial crisis of 2008–09. The case for discipline came completely undone as the crisis unfolded. As politicians poured trillions into reeling institutions, all notions of independence were abandoned and discipline was cast aside.

This concise and provocative book has a readability that belies its dense subject matter. The evidence produced by Roberts to support his points is thorough and compelling, but rarely overdone. In fact, *The Logic of Discipline* is so lean that Roberts leaves little space in which to consider how the system as it is now could be orientated to move "beyond discipline". His reluctance to offer a definitive cure does not however diminish the power of this revealing exploration of the democratic deficit that lingers at the core of many of our society's major institutions.