

Chapter Five: Method, methodology and politics

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In this chapter I seek to explore how and in what ways Chomsky's voluminous works on American foreign policy provide practical examples of a critical realist research approach in social science. The purpose for doing this is two-fold. First, Chomsky's political analysis has been systematically side-lined and dismissed within the academy as being extremist, and therefore worthy only of being treated as polemic rather than works with social scientific pedigree. Chomsky himself does not go out of his way to lay claim to a consistent and consistently applied political philosophy, confining his thoughts on the subject to a number of interviews published by Otero (1988) and Barsamian (1992). However, these rarely appear alongside his analysis of political events, which may go some way to explaining the apparent ease with which he has been so summarily dismissed. Second, as Carter and New (2004) observe, critical realist approaches to social science are a comparatively recent development, and much writing about realism and social science has been directed towards philosophical concerns rather than demonstrating what critical realist research might look like. Situating Chomsky's political writing within a critical realist framework, therefore, makes it possible to gain a greater appreciation of the intellectual depth of Chomsky's extensive body of social science work, as well as examine how we might 'do' critical realist social science.

Method and Methodology

The tradition of realism rests upon a number of philosophical tenets. The foundational claim is that there is a world which exists independently of our thoughts about it. In other words, social phenomena, like physical processes, are not merely constructs of our mind and language. Both physical objects and social phenomena are *real*, and they may or may not have effects. If this is the case, the physical world and the social world alike are amenable

to being known, in a scientific sense, using reliable scientific techniques. As such, 'the social sciences can be "sciences" in exactly the same sense as natural ones' (Bhaskar 1998: xvii).

However, there are specific conditions under which social scientific investigation can be accepted as 'scientific'. First, physical processes and social phenomena can only be accessible to knowledge claims through the use of theories and discourses. Crucially, these discourses may also have effects, and so are also objects for study. Physical and social phenomena, then, belong to the *intransitive* dimensions of science where discourses about them are *transitive* (Bhaskar 1975). Where there can be rival (transitive) theories about phenomena, the phenomena themselves stay the same (intransitive). While this may be intuitively acceptable about physical phenomena, it is a more complicated claim to make about the social world because the social world includes knowledge itself, and it is knowledge which can in turn shape social phenomena. Dealing with this recursive loop has been a major preoccupation in social and political theory.

Within social science, knowledge about the social world has reflected the impact of a long-standing dichotomy between the voluntarism associated with Weber's thought and the structuralism of Durkheim. The former derives from an assumption that social objects are constituted by intentional or meaningful behaviour, while the latter holds that social objects possess a life of their own, and even have the capability of coercing the individual. Critical realists seek to bridge this dichotomy, by arguing that societies pre-exist and thus can shape us, as well as being subject to being shaped by us. However, the relationship is asymmetrical, and as such agents always act in a world of structural constraints and possibilities that they did not produce. So, for example, people do not work to sustain the capitalist economy, but by engaging in paid work contribute to that outcome, regardless of their will or intention. This is an unintended consequence, as well as being a necessary condition for what they do (Bhaskar 1998). But while agents act within a context of pre-given structures, it cannot be said that structures determine their actions (Collier 1994: 142, 161).

Actions can be made comprehensible by examining the effect of structures on behaviour, but actors can always act unexpectedly or unpredictably.

This distinction between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of science points us towards a second tenet of the philosophy, namely, an explanatory account based upon our empirical experience alone cannot constitute a scientific account of that world (Sayer 2000). Empiricism, which identifies the real with the empirical, is a partial and misleading account. Critical realism, by contrast, argues that science must make distinctions between the *empirical*, the *actual* and the *real*. Collier (1994) calls this 'depth realism' allowing us to differentiate between the kinds of phenomena we experience..

The *empirical* is a concern with that which is observable. Empiricists look for patterns and regularities but tend not to ask whether the objects under observation may have structures, powers or qualities that are unobservable. To explore the *real*, by contrast, is make specific enquiries into the structure of some objects as well as their causal powers, whether or not these causal powers are exercised. So both minerals and bureaucracies have certain structures and causal powers, and both are capable of producing or generating empirically-observable patterns.

The *actual* is concerned with what happens if and when the generative mechanisms or powers are activated. 'Realists therefore seek to identify both necessity and possibility or potential in the world – what things must go together, and what could happen, given the nature of the objects' (Sayer 2000: 11). Because we may not be able to observe all aspects of the structures and powers of an object, unobservable entities can be said to be present by reference to observable effects. This means that the nature of the real object may constrain or enable what can happen. To identify the real nature of an object is not, however, to say that this then pre-determines what will happen. As Sayer observes, 'the real is whatever exists, be it natural or social, regardless of whether it is an empirical object for us, and whether we happen to have an adequate understanding of its nature' (2000: 11).

Therefore, for realists, how things are in reality is a different question from how people take them to be. Participating in society may give us some information about it, but that information can be deceptive (for example, when people blame immigrants for their own job loss). Just because the parts of the system are necessary does not mean that they are reducible to their constituent elements. To establish a means of grasping this point, realists refer to the term 'emergence'.

'The defining characteristic of emergent properties is their irreducibility. They are more than the sum of their constituents, since they are a product of their combination, and as such are able to modify these constituents' (Carter & New 2004: 7).

For example, while our biological imperatives are a necessary propensity at play in our social interactions, explanations for our social practices cannot legitimately be reduced to this element. Similarly, the interaction of two individuals will be influenced by the nature of their relationship to one another, as in the example of the teacher-pupil relationship. Given this interactivity, realists must move back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, and between theory and the empirical. The use of and emphasis on emergence suggests that it would be unreasonable to expect social science's descriptions to remain stable or unproblematic across time and space (Sayer 2000; Collier 1994) – even if it makes social scientific research a tougher challenge than the so-called 'hard sciences'.

The third and perhaps most distinctive philosophical tenet of critical realism is a drive to establish a satisfactory answer to the question of causation. As Maxwell (2012) argues, causation should not be understood, as it was by Hume, as discernable from identifying a 'constant conjunction of events'. Indeed, for critical realists, proving causation by gathering data on regularities or repeated occurrences is misleading and can lead to what Bhaskar refers to as an 'epistemic fallacy' (1989: 185). As Maxwell (2012: 12) argues, believing that causation can be established from 'successionist' observation leads to the 'collapse of the

distinction between ontology and epistemology'. Sayer (2000: 27) agrees, since such a belief 'transposes what is an ontological matter – concerning what exists (causes) into the epistemological matter of how we develop reliable knowledge'. What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we observe something happening. Instead, causal mechanisms must be identified to establish whether the conditions for activation have been triggered, modified or blocked.

Consistent regularities, the critical realist accepts, are only likely under special circumstances, typically within 'closed systems', as in a laboratory experiment where control is exercised over as many variables as possible. The social world is typically an 'open system', which means that the same causal power can produce different outcomes, reflecting the impact of the precise combination of mechanisms within a system, which may even include a chance encounter. This is why studying the real emergent properties of things must be considered in the light of the 'actual', because those emergent properties do not determine and may not be causal. This does mean that there is always the danger of an effect being attributed to one mechanism but is actually due to another. Another potential flaw is to imagine that what did happen is the only thing that could have happened, when in fact the future is always open. Given such complexities, it is unsurprising that debates within the social sciences can be so riven by interpretive disputes. However, this is to be expected. It does not mean we should give up attempts to understand causal effects (Collier 1994: 43).

Sayer argues that the world is more than patterns of events, it has, he argues, 'ontological depth: events arise from the workings of mechanisms which derive from the structures of objects, and they take place within geo-historical contexts' (2000: 15). The challenge faced by realist research is to distinguish between what *could* be the case with what *must* be the case, as well as *under what conditions*. Considering whether associations could be different (counterfactuals) also requires rigour when defining structures and concepts. 'Pursuing these questions about the conditions of existence of our objects of study is fundamental to

theorizing in social science' (Sayer 17). Ultimately, however, judgments on these matters are fallible, and in this respect realists accept - like any decent physicist - that much of what we take to be knowledge is provisional and that we have no reliably direct access to truth (Collier 1994). However, this does not mean that all accounts are equally valid. Some will have more resonance than others.

A fourth feature of critical realism is that it acknowledges that natural and social phenomena are intrinsically meaningful. As such, beliefs and meanings or reasons (even incorrect ones) can be causal (Bhaskar 1975: 117). Meaning has to be understood, and so is interpretive. Meaning is simply not amenable to measurements and counting. So while social science can use the same methods as the natural sciences regarding causal explanation, it must also use 'verstehen' or interpretive understanding to augment such approaches. Also, it is important to locate the objects or referent to which the meaning refers – whether these objects are social or physical (Sayer 2000: 35).

While natural scientists do well to consider the interpretive understanding of other scientists, social scientists must also consider the interpretive understanding of those that they study. Social science research thus operates within a double hermeneutic, of circles within circles.

'These circles imply a two-way movement, a "fusing of horizons" of listener and speakers, researcher and researched, in which the latter's actions and texts never speak simply for themselves, and yet are not reducible to the researcher's interpretation of them either' (Sayer 17).

However, meanings are related to material circumstances and contexts, and these material circumstances exist in a non-discursive, material dimension. To interpret what actors mean we have to relate their discourse to its referents and contexts (the real), referents which can be more or less stable.

While interpretivists reject causal explanation out of hand, critical realists argue that meanings can also be causal, because they may influence us to do things differently (Bhaskar 1975: 117). As such, where social research is concerned, there is not the assumption that causes can only be physical. Social structures and social relationships, neither of which are empirically observable, except by effects, are as causal as observable physical forces.

The fifth and final significant feature of critical realism is its commitment to the notion of emancipatory potential. As Sayer argues: 'to identify understandings in society as false, and hence actions informed by them as falsely based, is to imply that (other things being equal) those beliefs and actions ought to be changed' (Sayer 19). As such social science breaches 'the fact/value divide' (Collier 1994: 170) and should be motivated by concerns of social justice. There is an understanding that by identifying causal mechanisms as well as being qualitatively sensitized to how interventions are experienced, we may then be able to change things for the better. 'For the better' usually means 'better' for humanity, and thus involves the notion of 'universality'.

The social sciences do not have the freedom of research routines enjoyed in the natural sciences, where it is possible to isolate components in order to examine them in a replicable manner and form stable conclusions. Accordingly, social scientific enquiry must rely upon abstraction and careful conceptualization. It starts with theorising. The process of abstraction is a critical part of the research process, because if we divide or conflate things inappropriately then spurious conclusions will follow. There is always a process of theory building and hypothesis testing to undergo.

For realists, this kind of activity is more than fortuitously aligned with a natural quality of human nature (Wilkin 1997: 32). Realists refer to what they believe is a human capacity for *abduction* where we use imagination and intuition as well as evidence to make sense of our environment, and we do this in order to generate theories about our world. Abduction

involves induction, but does not presume we are a blank state, recognizing instead that we 'see' the world with a scientifically-informed intuition. Humans are, in other words, wired for *retroduction* or hypothesis-testing, whereby we use rational or evidence-based grounds for critically evaluating theories. This would involve working with an assumption that, if a mechanism were to exist and act in a particular manner, then it makes sense to ask whether it could account for the phenomena observed. (Lawson 1998: 164) Crucial to this approach, however, is the recognition that theories are never absolute and will change over time. Critical realists thus eschew relativism, without asserting claims to truth. In this manner, Chomsky and the naturalism of critical realism place emphasis on the need to use scientific approaches for studying the social sciences, while also recognizing that there will be limitations in our ability to construct explanatory theories. This suggests that he accepts a significant limit to our capacity to enquire and generate knowledge: we may not be able to move beyond the level of description (Chomsky, 1981: 9-10). However, as Collier (1994) argues, the social sciences should still seek to be '(a) explanatory sciences; (b) sciences without closure; (c) sciences with hermeneutic premisses' (161)

Given critical realism's demanding methodological approach, it is hardly surprising that it does not lead to 'cookbook prescriptions of method' (Sayer 2000: 19). For realists, methods must be appropriate to their objects. Although naturalism philosophically underpins their approach, analysis of the interpretive dimension may also illuminate. Finally, adopting reflexivity is necessary for considering the researcher's own influence on the research process.

Having established the central tenets of a critical realist philosophy, the question of how to apply this philosophy practically and methodologically remains. I argue that the body of work associated with Chomsky's analysis of American foreign policy over a period of fifty years offers us an excellent exemplar of how critical realism can be successfully operationalised.

Applied Critical Realism: An Account of American Foreign Policy

The realist Morgenthau (1946) argues that foreign policy is concerned with international relations between nation states. While foreign policy and international relations operate within the larger system of international law which is arguably based upon universal humanitarian principles, the central driver, for a particular country's foreign policy will be a paramount concern for its own 'national interest'. Inevitable, all states face the same challenge – how to secure the national interest of the country through the development and application of a foreign policy aimed at building alliances, negotiating trade terms, and defending its various interests abroad in the face of other countries who also seek to maintain, protect and pursue their version of national interest. Ensuring this is done legally, appropriately and humanely is at the very least a difficult balancing act for the policy maker, and is also likely to be contentious and at times far from straightforward.

Ultimately Chomsky is a humanitarian, concerned with the national and international balances of power, and the ability of all humans across the globe to live free, creative and productive lives. Empirically we know that for large numbers of people this goal is currently unattainable, and so Chomsky sets out to examine how and why this state of affairs is maintained. As we have seen for the critical realist, causation matters and it matters for Chomsky because he hopes and believes that a better understanding of the dynamics involved will support all of us to bring about a better and more fair world.

So, when Chomsky sets himself the task of foreign policy evaluation, he adopts a distinctively different approach from the dominant foreign policy analysis practice. Although he does the mainstream work of analyzing the foreign policy pronouncements and documents provided by successive United States governments, Chomsky does something more. As Hedges argues, Chomsky also chooses to consider American foreign policy by 'stand[ing] in the shoes of those outside our gates' (Hedges in Chomsky 2003: 1). In other

words, Chomsky is interested in both evaluating American foreign policy on its own terms, as well as by considering how it is experienced by those who are subject to it.

In doing so, Chomsky employs a number of critical realist methods and amasses an array of evidence to support his theoretical understanding of *the real* necessary to interpret the *empirical* and the *actual*. As a critical realist, Chomsky eschews the interpretivist and postmodern views that key social phenomena are not amenable to scientific analysis with the comment: 'there is no reason to abandon the general approach of the natural sciences when we turn to the study of human beings and society' (1981: 219). And yet, as he acknowledges in respect of social science research, there are significant limitations. So while we can describe and explain what has happened and why, it does not mean we can then use theory to predict with any certainty what will happen next. As he repeatedly states, when he's asked to comment on the likely prospects following a change of government: '[t]he short answer is that we do not really know and can only speculate' (Chomsky 2003: 137). He will then go on to show how, nevertheless, the pattern of outcomes over time has remained significantly unchanged – and so in effect an element of prediction is possible if there is no change in the underlying dispensation.

Broadly speaking, Chomsky employs the following three methods: evaluation of policy claims against policy outcomes; analysis of statistical correlations; and comparative analysis of foreign policy focus towards two different countries either at a particular historical moment, or the same country across time. Each strategy he employs illuminates the subject matter in a way which suggests that structures and generative mechanisms with powers (*the real*) are at work below the surface (*the empirical*).

Taking the first method, and returning to the definition of foreign policy, Chomsky shows us that US policy makers tend to play down the element of policy associated with 'self-interest' and instead attempt an association with humanitarian principles (Chomsky and Herman 1979a: 105). If we take at face value the accounts (*the transitive dimension*) given by

American foreign policy actors of their actions, he argues, then their claims can be evaluated against the effects and outcomes of their policy (*the actual* and *the empirical*). His claim is that this will reveal a pattern of inconsistencies between the two. In other words, judgment of their actions when compared with outcome effects exposes how professed reasons are unreasonable in the sense that they do not stand the test of being rational – unless as Chomsky argues, professed claims are designed to obscure what is really happening. Chomsky asks the realist question: what things must go together to produce the empirical outcomes we observe from American foreign policy?

To examine this question Chomsky will often refer to ‘measuring’ the US role in the world (Chomsky 2003). To examine and ‘measure’ this question, we have a number of variables – all of which have various means by which the variables can be known or accessed. So policy claims can be derived from policy documents and actor pronouncements. Examining the discourses employed is revealing. In terms of the effects of policy, Chomsky is always careful to reference his sources and his usual approach is to make reference to the government’s own data collection and documentation. This is not because the government’s records are necessarily true, (although given the fact that the American government puts considerable resource into intelligence means it’s data are probably fairly accurate) but because if the government’s own record contradicts what policy makers claim, then this should alert the analyst to a contradiction – and for critical realists contradictions point to the need to examine mechanisms at work beneath the surface. It is important to notice that Chomsky recognizes the need to be circumspect about what one can or cannot say is *true* unless one has first-hand observed experience, (by for example counting the number of warheads at a particular point in time or the amount of money given in military aid). The social scientist working with the kinds of variables associated with foreign policy is most likely going to be reliant on secondary data. The sources of that secondary data matter and need appropriate justification. In many cases Chomsky uses the ‘official’ record because it is the Government’s own creation in relation to its policy outcomes. This kind of evidence is

particularly useful for policy evaluation, as it pre-empts contestation over the data being used to judge the government's action, as will occur when non-governmental data sources are used.

A telling example of an inconsistency between the government's rhetoric and its own evidence arose when America's highly militarised foreign policy was being justified to the public on the basis that the USSR represented a growing nuclear threat. However, the government's own data showed this was not the case (Chomsky, 1992: 11 & 26). Instead, Chomsky argues, the evidence suggests that nuclear threat derives from the activities of the West, and so the experience of 'threat' is what is experienced by many countries outside the West. In this example, the use of 'evidence' from the Government's own records tells us that the policy claims are disingenuous. Mechanisms other than those being claimed must be at work.

A more contemporary example is illustrated by Chomsky's examination of the 'war on terror' initiated by Bush after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. The picture painted by American foreign policy was that American values of democracy and tolerance were under threat by dangerous militant extremists. Chomsky quotes Bush asking 'Why do they hate us, when we're so good?' (2003: 83). Foreign policy moved to increased US and western militarization, and 'pro-active attacks' or invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan or Lebanon. Such policies were justified on the basis that the West and its values may be 'defended'. Actions taken are 'described as proactive measures in defense against terror' (Chomsky 2003: 58).

Chomsky presents considerable evidence based upon the Government's own data, which suggests that, if the United States were serious about decreasing the threat of terror, then the way to do this would be to stop supporting and participating in it (Chomsky 2003: 76). As Chomsky argues 'the current leader of the 'War on Terror' is [from] the only state in the world that's been condemned by the World Court for international terrorism'. This same

State – the US - ‘has vetoed a resolution calling on all states to observe international law, a fact that perhaps is relevant to the current situation’ (2003: 50). Far from reducing terrorism in the world, the US is shown, using its own evidence, to be increasing its probability. First, by its own acts which, if conducted by other states or non-state actors, would be called terrorism, and second, because such acts taken in the name of the ‘war on terror’ are soon followed by a ‘new generation of jihadis, inspired by hatred of the US and its regional client’ (Chomsky 2011: 28).

When defining terrorism, Chomsky uses the official US government definition: ‘the threat or use of violence to achieve political, religious, or other ends through intimidation, inducing fear, and so on, directed against civilian populations’ (Chomsky 2003: 52). He explores many examples in Latin America and the Middle East where American foreign policy is directly and indirectly responsible for terrorist acts, by funding, training or arming foreign elites. Typically American foreign policy describes this activity as ‘aid’.

In one of his most recent books, he invites us to imagine a worse terrorist scenario than that which happened to the US on 9/11 2001:

Suppose that al-Qaeda had been supported by an awesome superpower intent on overthrowing the government of the United States. Suppose that the attack had succeeded: al-Qaeda had bombed the White House, killed the president, and installed a vicious military dictatorship, which killed some fifty thousand to one hundred thousand people, brutally tortured seven hundred thousand ... and drove the economy to one of its worst disasters in US history ...

He concludes:

[A]s everyone in Chile knows, it is not necessary to imagine, because it in fact did happen ... on ‘the first 9/11,’ September 11, 1973. The only change above is to [the] per capita equivalents’ ... (2011: 27).

Given the disjunction between the policy rhetoric and the government's own evidence, how do we account for this? What are the 'real' mechanisms at work here? Chomsky does not atomize events and view them in isolation. Instead he looks at the underlying power structures within the world and within the United States. America's identification as a superpower becomes not an insignificant variable, and when we combine this with an acknowledgment that *state capitalism* characterizes the political economy, then this too becomes a variable for consideration. For Chomsky, the evidence demonstrates that state capitalism both generates and protects elites to extract profit and wealth at the expense of non-elites internationally – even *national* non-elites. If we acknowledge this, then events make more sense. If we take an example of a policy utterance, at face-value: 'we will not surrender our borders to those who wish to exploit our history of compassion and justice' (Bill Clinton in Chomsky 2011: 29), we are in danger of 'seeing' acts of aggression as defence, mistakes, or the result of occasional 'bad apples'. Alternatively, if we look at only the empirical evidence we might conclude that US foreign policy is motivated by terror – which Chomsky finds an equally unconvincing conclusion. Rather, there is a need to consider events within the context of the broader political economy, in order to better understand and describe policy outcomes. As Chomsky argues:

... it is not that Rumsfeld, Cheney, and others wanted terror. Rather, it is not a high priority as compared with control over the world's energy resources, which provides Washington with 'veto power' and 'critical leverage' over industrial rivals ... (2011: 28)

And

The divine right of aggression and other forms of intervention to ensure 'uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources' is, of course unilateral. The privileged and powerful, and their dependencies, must be immune to such assaults (2001: 26)

Speaking in 2003 and comparing the first 'war on terror' against Nicaragua, with the post 9/11 'war on terror', Chomsky argues: 'Same people, same institutions, same policies. You expect the same outcomes if you want to think about what the second phase of the current 'war on terror' will be like' (58). Here he is using the unchanged causal or generative mechanisms to draw the conclusion that there will be similar outcomes and effects.

The theory that the mechanisms of *state* capitalism contribute to a better explanation of current affairs rests upon the empirical observation that free market capitalism does not exist. Yet, government references to the importance of the free market and free trade are ubiquitous in Government policy pronouncements. Chomsky shows with evidence that, in fact, the business community depends upon extensive economic support as well as legislative support of the state. 'Business circles have long taken for granted that the state must play a major role in maintaining the system of private profit' (Chomsky 1992: 108).

Chomsky refers to this variously as military Keynesianism or 'welfare for the rich' and 'public subsidy for private profit'. In order to induce business to invest, the state subsidizes by supporting research and development, or guaranteeing a market will exist, and exhibit certain characteristics favourable to business, especially big business. He points to those sections of the economy that appear to be 'competitive', and is able to show that they heavily rely upon public subsidy: namely advanced technology, capital-intensive agriculture and pharmaceuticals being three of the most notable industries not explicitly manufacturing weaponry.

At the same time, the state generates demand for military hardware by having a constant stream of 'enemies' that it must defend itself from. The state then engages in research and development for high technology in order to retain a military edge, and innovations then filter into other industries. This system ensures the survival of 'capitalism', in its statist form, because as Chomsky argues, capitalism would not have survived had the state and its elites not intervened within the economy in ways to ensure its survival. 'Free' market conditions

are most likely to be imposed only on 'others' (third world countries), while for the West, trade barriers, protectionism and exceptionalism are the norm.

Chomsky has an additional data source to use in his evaluation of the relationship between policy claims and the effects of American foreign policy; he listens to those who are on the receiving end of this policy. This more qualitative data collection approach may be derived from 'conversations' or foreign news reports. Chomsky travels extensively, and often to some of the more impoverished and troubled parts of the world, parts of the world where America has stated policy objectives. It is in these places that he meets and talks to ordinary people. While some members of Latin American elites, for example, might describe America as having a history of 'compassion and justice', those at the hard end of America's military and economic might offer a different picture. This qualitative approach also exposes contradictions between the claims and rhetoric of policy and those who are subject to this policy. Indeed it suggests that the ways in which policy is couched and the discourses used are obfuscatory, such that the rhetoric used is mis-describing what is really happening.

Talking about a trip to Southern Colombia:

I spent a couple of hours listening to testimonies of poor peasants and they talked about terror. But the worst terror that they have suffered ... is from direct U.S. terror, namely fumigation. Fumigation completely destroys their lives. It destroys their crops, it kills their animals. Children are dying; you can see them with scabs all over their bodies ... (2003: 69)

This policy of fumigation was justified as part of another declaration of 'war' by the USA government - this time purportedly on drugs. Chomsky takes issue with this explanation, and interprets the evidence differently. He notes that the people in this area had elected their own governor, one of the few indigenous people to be elected in the history of the hemisphere. The emergence of an indigenous leader, committed to the interests of his people, triggered an American counter-insurgency program which had the effect of driving

peasants off the land, an outcome with clear benefits in relation to the interests of elite or foreign investors.

Chomsky's critical realist approach points to a continuing problem within social science: either policy utterances are qualitatively taken at face value; or empirical evidence is studied without examining underlying power structures. Either approach alone constitutes bad science – hence Chomsky's dismissal of much that passes for social 'science'. Feminists in their contribution to the philosophy of science exposed the ways in which

'those in dominant positions ... tend to presume that their knowledge is disembodied, unmarked by their position and character, ... [as though] it is of universal applicability, when in fact they are passing off their own particular, situated view as universal. ... [their] dominant claim to see everything, while themselves remaining unseen – a kind of 'god-trick' - assumes that their position has no bearing upon the content or status of their knowledge' (Haraway in Sayer 2000: 51).

Chomsky is genuinely horrified with the violence perpetrated in the name of foreign policy, which then becomes sanctioned or ignored by much social science. Too often the account of events enters the scholarly literature, not as terror but as 'counter-terror' or as a 'just war' (2003: 60).

Sayer's argument that realist social science requires reflexivity is relevant here. 'We are always in some position or other in relation to our objects; the important thing is to consider whether that influence is benign or malign' (Sayer 2000: 53). Chomsky does just this. Rather than being an American who identifies with the 'self-interested strategies' of imperialism and protectionism under American foreign policy, he seeks to expose its *real* purposes *and* he recognizes that as a privileged American, his speaking out may have an effect (Chomsky 1988: 134, 207 & Chomsky 1969). He collects and draws on evidence, using mixed methods, from a variety of sources, and combines the evidence base with an account of the underlying mechanisms that must be at work, in order to explain events and

draw conclusions. His conclusion is that foreign policy, is 'self-interested' but not in the national interest, as is so often claimed. A better fit is that the foreign policy is in accordance with elite interests. In other words, it is designed to protect and expand the interests of elites, not those of ordinary Americans or 'other' non-elites. He enables us to 'see' that non-elites beyond America's borders, subject as they are to America's foreign policy, are unlikely to experience or describe American Foreign Policy as 'compassionate' or 'just'. This helps us understand why America is so 'hated'. Nevertheless, he also reminds us '[i]t's not that the United States has any particular interest in egregious human rights violations. It's just that it's a natural corollary to what it is interested in, and to how you achieve goals like that' (2003: 48).

Chomsky explicitly takes a positioned reflexive approach to his analysis in the sense that he will meticulously identify his sources as well as acknowledge when he speculates or draws inferences from data. Indeed his decision to write and talk about American foreign policy is because he finds it horrifying, and, as an American citizen and academic, he believes he is in a privileged position with a responsibility to expose, and possibly influence and mitigate some of the excesses of policy (1988: 369). As he argues:

Science is held in such awe in our culture that every scientist has special responsibility to make clear to the lay audience where his [sic] expert knowledge actually yields scientifically verifiable results and where he is guessing, indulging in sheer speculation, or expressing his own personal hopes about the success of his research (1988: 413).

So the responsibility is not merely a civic one: it is also about the responsibility of a trained scientist.

The second method employed by Chomsky involves the examination statistical correlations. As critical realists and Chomsky observe, they empirical observations 'obviously don't tell you about causal relations' (Chomsky 1988: 47) so there is a need to reach an

understanding about the relationship between the variables and the power of the relevant social objects under consideration (*the real*). For example, in a study he published with Edward Herman called *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (1979a), the high correlation between US foreign aid and torture is explored. Employing critical realist analysis, they concluded that there were no structural reasons why the US government should have a specific interest in torture. So they looked for other correlations, and found that 'one of the best correlations was between U.S. aid and improvement in the investment climate. So as a country improves opportunities for investors to extract resources and so on, foreign aid goes up' (Chomsky 2003: 47). However, a further correlation was also identified between U.S. aid and human rights abuses. Digging further, Herman and Chomsky find that aid often means military aid, which involves training and weaponry. The conclusion Chomsky draws from these correlations is that, to improve the investment climate, it is deemed necessary 'to murder union organizers and peasant leaders, to torture priests, to massacre peasants, to undermine social programs' (Chomsky 2003: 47). Chomsky does not hold back in the analysis of the mechanisms. He makes it clear that the mechanisms which drive the need to improve investment climates lead to effects that are far from compassionate or humanitarian, but instead generate death and destruction, principally among those who are powerless.

In another example of this method, Herman and Chomsky examine the role of the western media (1988). The purported role of the media is to function as a fourth estate, to hold up a mirror to our actions, so that we can see what is happening. The media in other words is meant to help to ensure the proper institutional functioning of the separation and balance of powers as a key element of American democracy. The separation of powers is designed to ensure a healthy functioning democracy, and media pundits will claim that they play a vital role in giving the population information, specifically by scrutinizing the activities of government and those in power, and thereby enabling them to be held to account. Knowledge and education are said to be functional to a healthy democracy because they are

the means by which a population can participate in the democratic process. Again, Chomsky questions this claimed purpose of the media, on the basis of his examination of statistical correlations. These statistical correlations suggest other causal mechanisms are at play offering which, when recognized, demonstrate an alternative account of the media's role in contemporary society.

In their 1988 study, Herman and Chomsky compared the media coverage of the murder of one Polish priest (Jerzy Popieluszko) against the murder of 100 religious victims, including an Archbishop (Oscar Romero), in Latin America. Not only did the murder of one Polish priest far exceed the coverage of one hundred Latin American religious victims in terms of the number of articles or items on a television news programme, but they also found that the number of column inches and the number of front page articles were significantly and disproportionately weighted in favour of the murdered Polish priest (39). To make sense of the correlation between the percentage of coverage and the relative importance of the issue, one might employ what are said to be the objective 'codes and conventions' employed by the media to justify their foreign news gatekeeping choices and the percentage of coverage (Galtung and Ruge 1970). For example, events are said to be more likely to become news if the event is bad and can be personalized, especially if it involves an elite; is unambiguous and thus easily interpretable by the audience; and that the personalization means an audience can identify with the subject, in the sense that they share cultural values and language.

As with the correlation between U.S. aid and human rights abuses, we find that the standard explanation cannot account for the evidence. In relation to elite membership, one of the Latin American religious victims was also a catholic, but as an archbishop, was clearly much higher up the echelon than the polish priest. Also, among the one hundred Latin American dead, were 4 American women who were also raped before being murdered. 'Victims', in other words, that are more closely identified with the audience in terms of culture and language, than a Polish priest. If one follows the professed 'codes and conventions', then

one would expect the percentage coverage on the Latin American 'victims' to be greater than the coverage of the Polish 'victim', but the opposite was the case. Alongside these objective measures, Herman and Chomsky also qualitatively examined the language used to report these various events. The murder of Popieluszko was accompanied by expressions of passion and outrage, whereas the deaths of the other hundred victims were given a 'low-key' treatment. The objective codes and conventions said to explain what makes a newsworthy event, do not, Chomsky argues, fit the evidence, and the question is why. It suggests that something else is going on. Despite the media's own claims about its remit and role in society, there are other structural mechanisms at work with the power to influence outcomes, to skew dramatically the predicted treatment of two apparently unrelated events. A more *real* account acknowledges this.

Given that such events are associated with foreign affairs, and we already know that the US government has a robust foreign policy, we might draw the conclusion that the government is intervening in the media agenda. However, Chomsky does not support such a conspiratorial account, and argues that there is little evidence to support any claim of government interference.

'The government can't tell the media what to do because they don't have the power to do it here [America]. In this respect, the United States is unusually free. ... [I]n England, the government can raid the office of the BBC and stop them from doing things. They can't do it here' (2003: 98).

Even a cursory examination of the media from a political economy perspective reveals that mainstream media organisations are huge corporations which have interests in common with the corporate sector as a whole. There is an explicit connection as well, namely the vast revenues which flow from corporate sponsors through advertising deals. As such, the need to ensure that there is a profitable climate for their elite clients, at home and abroad, is of paramount interest, and will thus influence editorial content. In the example above, the

government of Poland was communist at the time and thus represented an enemy of the 'capitalist' system as a whole. Even a single victim of an enemy state is treated as a newsworthy event. By contrast, Guatemala, El Salvador and the rest of Latin America are 'client states' of America. This means America has intervened to ensure American-friendly elites remain in power, thus ensuring that American corporations have ready access to resources and markets. Victims of these client states, by contrast, become 'unworthy', and certainly less important, as measured by column inches and where a report, if any, appears in the news coverage. The conclusion Chomsky draws is that:

'[G]uiding geopolitical conceptions, which are essentially invariant ... are rooted in the unchanging institutional structure of ownership and domination in our own society' (Chomsky 1985: 55).

In another example of correlation, Chomsky uses the government's own records to expose the media's complicity with the government's pro-elite, and pro-business agenda:

The current intifada in the occupied territories started on September 29, 2000. On October 1, two days later, Israel started using U.S. helicopters – there are no Israeli helicopters – to attack civilian targets, apartment complexes and so on, killing and wounding dozens of people. That went on for two days. No Palestinian fire, just stone-throwing from kids. On October 3, after two days of this, Clinton made the biggest deal in a decade to send military helicopters to Israel. The media here refused to publish it. To this day, there has not been a report. That was the decision of the editors. I actually joined with a group that went and talked to [editors of the Boston Globe] and they simply made it clear, they're not going to publish it. And the same decision was made by every other newspaper in the United States, literally every one. Somebody did a database search. The only reference to it in the country he could find was a letter in Raleigh, North Carolina (Chomsky 2003: 99).

He concludes: 'that happens to be an unusually narrow and easily identifiable case. But it generalizes'. Without the consideration of the distribution of power, and the political and economic structures underpinning events, it makes it difficult to make sense of media behavior and motives.

The motive is that Israel is a US military base. And it's strong. It's one of the states that, like Turkey, controls the Middle East region militarily in the interest of the United States. And the Palestinians offer nothing. They do not have any power, they don't have any wealth, so they don't have any rights (2003: 100).

The third method employed by Chomsky is a comparative analysis of foreign policy focus towards two different countries, either at a particular historical moment, or the same country across time. Again if foreign policy pronouncements towards two countries with similar human rights abuses are different, then this suggests we need to examine underlying mechanisms at play. In this approach, Chomsky argues that American foreign policy treats the world as divided into 'client states' and 'enemy states'. Client states are those countries that cultivate a welcoming investment climate for American and Western capital, but are also typically characterized by extremely poor wealth distribution. Client states are shown to be receiving extensive military 'aid' in the form of weaponry and training from America, aid designed to ensure the maintenance of the status quo. In these countries, extensive investment and resource extraction will be identified, and 'aid' from America is likely to support corrupt elites. Enemy states, by contrast, fall into two categories. They are either those seeking to protect their economies from American 'investment' for their own business or military elite, or they are countries seeking to redistribute national wealth through land reforms, and health and educational policies (thereby offering the threat of a 'good example'). For Chomsky, each case at each historical point in time has its own geopolitical nuances, and the picture is never static, nor determined. However, general patterns emerge that support his interpretation, and again demonstrate that isolated and atomistic analysis of single events or analysis which uncritically accepts the elite's own conceptual framing

represents poor science. Situating events within their context, examining power structures of various mechanisms, refusing to take elite accounts at face value and asking what must be the case, given certain causal mechanisms, when we identify contradictory approaches to similar events is more illuminating.

Over the fifty years that Chomsky has been writing, he offers numerous examples where American foreign policy is demonstrably more concerned with elite 'self-interest' than with generalizable humanitarian principles. Examples examined by Chomsky include responses to population massacres inflicted by Indonesia during its invasion of East Timor and in a similar time period the massacres perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Indonesian brutality elicited barely any condemnation in policy or the press, while atrocities inflicted by the Khmer Rouge received extensive coverage.

The crucial difference was that the slaughter in Timor was carried out by a US client with critical US diplomatic and military support that mounted along with escalating atrocities, while the slaughter in Cambodia was conducted by an official enemy and was furthermore, highly functional ... to restore popular support for US intervention and violence in the Third World ... (1989: 155).

Chomsky and Herman's comparative study of these two events was published in 1979b (Chapters 5 & 6). What these carefully referenced studies show is not an *empirical* account of what happened, but rather they examine 'the relation between the evidence available and the picture presented by the media and journals of opinion' (1989: 156). As Chomsky documents later, the study generated a furore among academics and opinion-leaders (see note 31 to appendix 1 p 383 & Edgley, 2000: 110) who charged Chomsky with being an apologist for Pol Pot because he was pointing out that the media were inflating the numbers killed in Cambodia, even when the State Department's own available and fairly reliable evidence seemed to suggest the numbers were lower. It is difficult to establish an *empirical*, let alone an '*actual*' picture of the events of war, but what was possible was to identify an

'empirical' mismatch in what was being reported. This means identifying sources is critical and highly relevant because it is the relationship between the source and the evidence that is exposing.

... [W]e drew no specific conclusions about the actual facts ... an attempt to assess the actual facts is a different topic ... [t]hat is a simple point of logic. The question we addressed was how the evidence available was transmuted as it passed through the filters of the ideological system. Plainly, that inquiry into the propaganda system at work is not affected, one way or another, by whatever may be discovered about the actual facts. We did tentatively suggest that in the case of Timor, the church sources and refugee studies we cited were plausible, and that in the case of Cambodia, State Department specialists were probably presenting the most credible accounts. Both suggestions are well confirmed in retrospect, but the accuracy of our suspicions as to the facts is not pertinent to the question we addressed ... as we repeatedly stressed. (1989: 155).

Chomsky is also at pains to point out that this does not mean that that he is of the view that the 'facts' do not matter. For a critical realist establishing evidence to develop causal accounts is of central concern.

Thus we took issue with the assertion of Jean Lacouture in the *New York Review of Books* that facts do not matter; we did not accept his contention that it is of no consequence whether the killings under Pol Pot were in the thousands or millions ... imagine the reaction if some critic of Israel were to allege that Israel boasted of killing several million people during its invasion of Lebanon in 1982, then conceding that perhaps the number was in the thousands, but that the difference is of no significance. (1989: 156).

Here again we see Chomsky drawing comparison and parallel between the way in which two events in different parts of the world are interpreted and responded to, during a similar period of geopolitical history.

Another approach he takes is to explore shifts in response to the same country and leader across time. In his book *Deterring Democracy* (1992), Chomsky examines the evidence to make sense of the shift in policy towards Saddam Hussein from 'favored friend' in the 1980s to 'evil monster' in the 1990s. During and after the 1980s war between Iran and Iraq, American foreign policy treated Hussein as an ally, as they provided the kind of intelligence and equipment necessary for Iraq to engage in nuclear and chemical warfare. Hussein's image as benign survived, despite the evidence that Hussein's own policies involved the systematic slaughter of the Iraqi Kurdish population. When Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, (territory regarded as within the US's sphere of influence), policy quickly shifted to sanctions and eventually to US and Allied military invasion. American policy makers started referring to Hussein's domestic policies towards Kurds as evidence of his evil intent, having previously ignored it, while at the same time ignoring the effects of their own policy of sanctions on Kurds (a 'humanitarian catastrophe'). Hussein's domestic policies had always lacked humanitarian principles. If we treat the protestations of policy makers as unreliable, and instead explore the underlying mechanisms of state capitalism we see their actions in a different light, and the policy shift becomes comprehensible. The empirical evidence, made comprehensible when put into context by the structures of power and influence, show instead an absence of humanitarian concern on the part of American foreign policy makers and instead an elite drive to 'secure access to the country's oil reserves and to send a message of dominance across the region' (as reported by Steel in Chomsky 2011: 129).

None of this can ever be mentioned, even in passing, by those who strike heroic poses about the alleged 'genocides' perpetrated by official enemies, while

scrupulously avoiding or denying our own crimes, a form of depravity that is not unusual among sectors of educated opinion (2011: 129).

The inconsistent policy treatment of the same person or country at different times, or the different treatment of two countries at the same point in time, is, Chomsky argues, instructive. His lesson is that it is essential to treat the utterances of policy makers, not as 'evidence' in and of itself, but rather, when considered in the light of empirical outcomes, as indicative that mechanisms, not themselves empirically observable, that are at play. In so doing a more *real* account and analysis is possible.

A technique Chomsky uses to alert us to the duplicity of elites is to name the concepts they use to refer to world affairs as 'newspeak'. In other words, to expose the extent to which their language is distorting and ideological, as they seek to deflect and mask the *real* relations between things. 'Stability' involves 'subordination to Washington's will' (2011: 130). 'Free trade agreements', mean granting corporations the right of 'national treatment' abroad. 'If General Motors invests in Mexico, it must be granted the rights of a Mexican business. If a Mexican of flesh and blood were to arrive in New York and demand 'national treatment' he would be lucky if he did not end up in Guantanamo' (31). '[S]ecurity' does not refer to the security of the population; rather to the security of the 'principle architects of policy' ... megacorporations and great financial institutions, nourished by the states they largely dominate (27). And, the term 'communist'

has a technical sense in planning circles, as in media and commentary, referring to labor leaders, peasant activists, human rights workers, priests reading the Gospels with peasants and organizing self-help groups based on their radical pacifist message, and others with the wrong priorities ... (25).

Chomsky calls what passes for commentary on world affairs in the West, propaganda. Crucially, however, the propaganda is targeted at, as well as maintained by, 'the educated elites', not the mass of ordinary American citizens. Chomsky will often provide evidence

from opinion polls to suggest that ordinary people are opposed to government policies (1992: 374), and that they favor instead more humanitarian responses. This Chomsky argues is because 'self-interest' on the part of American foreign policy is recognized to refer to elite interests, not the democratic interests of the general population. As such, debate must remain within narrow confines, Chomsky argues, to ensure elites do not suffer cognitive dissonance, because:

[m]ost people are not liars. I don't want to deny that there are outright liars, just brazen propagandists. You can find them in journalism and in academic professions as well. But I don't think that's the norm. The norm is obedience, adoption of uncritical attitudes, taking the easy path of self-deception (in Peck 1988: 39)

Chomsky's considerable body of work examining American Foreign policy, where he exposes by its own evidence the failure to adhere to humanitarian principles, embodies all the philosophical principles of critical realism. He is quite clear that empirical evidence needs to be understood within the context of wider structures and systems. These structures and systems themselves are unobservable, except by the effects of their operation. They are structures that do not determine the future, because they are always upheld by human beings, who could always do things differently. Facts and causation matter, especially when we know that millions of men, women and children are starving, because a myriad of policies and policing ensure they are denied access to land, jobs, clean water and basic security. Ultimately, policies and policing are upheld and defended by individuals, who can and must be challenged. To resort to the notion that such empirically observable humanitarian phenomena are mere 'social constructions' is to deny our basic humanity. Social science while never able to achieve the levels of prediction associated with the natural sciences, must still adhere to scientific principles by seeking to explain the evidence, in order to bring about humanitarian change. Critical realism offers a cogent philosophical and theoretical rationale for this approach, and Chomsky's work stands as a practical exemplar of what is possible.

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