

Noam Chomsky: *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*, pp. 54-66.  
Interviews with David Barsamian. Odonian Press, Berkeley, CA 1993.

*Barsamian: India today is torn asunder by various separatist movements. Kashmir is an incredible mess, occupied by the Indian army, and there are killings, detentions and massive human rights violations in the Punjab and elsewhere.*

*I'd like you to comment on a tendency in the Third World to blame the colonial masters for all the problems that are besetting their countries today. They seem to say, "Yes, India has problems, but it's the fault of the British—before that, India was just one happy place."*

Chomsky: It's difficult to assess blame for historical disasters. It's somewhat like trying to assess blame for the health of a starving and diseased person. There are lots of different factors. Let's say the person was tortured—that certainly had an effect. But maybe when the torture was over, that person ate the wrong diet, lived a dissolute life and died from the combined effects. That's the kind of thing we're talking about.

There's no doubt that imperial rule was a disaster. Take India. When the British first moved into Bengal, it was one of the richest places in the world. The first British merchant warriors described it as a paradise. That area is now Bangladesh and Calcutta—the very symbols of despair and hopelessness.

There were rich agricultural areas producing unusually fine cotton. They also had advanced manufacturing, by the standards of the day. For example, an Indian firm built one of the flagships for an English admiral during the Napoleonic Wars. It wasn't built in British factories—it was the Indians' own manufacture.

You can read about what happened in Adam Smith, who was writing over two hundred years ago. He deplored the deprivations that the British were carrying out in Bengal. As he puts it, they first destroyed the agricultural economy and then turned "dearth into a famine." One way they did this was by taking the agricultural lands and turning them into poppy production (since opium was the only thing Britain could sell to China). Then there was mass starvation in Bengal.

The British also tried to destroy the existing manufacturing system in the parts of India they controlled. Starting from about 1700, Britain imposed harsh tariff regulations to prevent Indian manufacturers from competing with British textiles. They had to undercut and destroy Indian textiles because India had a comparative advantage. They were using better cotton and their manufacturing system was in many respects comparable to, if not better than, the British system.

The British succeeded. India deindustrialized, it ruralized. As the industrial revolution spread in England, India was turning into a poor, ruralized and agrarian country.

It wasn't until 1846, when their competitors had been destroyed and they were way ahead, that Britain suddenly discovered the merits of free trade. Read the British liberal historians, the big advocates of free trade—they were very well aware of it. Right through that period they say: "Look, what we're doing to India isn't pretty, but there's no other way for the mills of Manchester to survive. We have to destroy the competition."

And it continues. We can pursue this case by case through India. In 1944, Nehru wrote an interesting book [*The Discovery of India*] from a British prison. He pointed out that if you trace British influence and control in each region of India, and then compare that with the level of poverty in the region, they correlate. The longer the British have been in a region, the poorer it is. The worst, of course, was Bengal—now Bangladesh. That's where the British were first.

You can't trace these same things in Canada and North America, because there they just decimated the population. It's not only the current "politically correct" commentators that describe this—you can go right back to the founding fathers.

The first secretary of defense, General Henry Knox, said that what we're doing to the native population is worse than what the conquistadors did in Peru and Mexico. He said future historians will look at the "destruction" of these people—what would nowadays be called genocide—and paint the acts with "sable colors" [in other words, darkly].

This was known all the way through. Long after John Quincy Adams, the intellectual father of Manifest Destiny, left power, he became an opponent of both slavery and the policy toward the Indians. He said he'd been involved—along with the rest of them—in a crime of "extermination" of such enormity that surely God would punish them for these "heinous sins."

Latin America was more complex, but the initial population was virtually destroyed within a hundred and fifty years. Meanwhile, Africans were brought over as slaves. That helped devastate Africa even before the colonial period, then the conquest of Africa drove it back even further.

After the West had robbed the colonies—and they did, no question about that, and there's also no question that it contributed to their own development—they changed over to so-called "neocolonial" relationships, which means domination without direct administration. After that it was generally a further disaster.

### **Divide and conquer**

*To continue with India: talk about the divide-and rule policy of the British Raj, playing off Hindus against Muslims. You see the results of that today.*

Naturally, any conqueror is going to play one group against another. For example, I think about 90% of the forces that the British used to control India were Indians.

*There's that astonishing statistic that at the height of British power in India, they never had more than 150,000 people there.*

That was true everywhere. It was true when the American forces conquered the Philippines, killing a couple hundred thousand people. They were being helped by Philippine tribes, exploiting conflicts among local groups. There were plenty who were going to side with the conquerors.

But forget the Third World—just take a look at the Nazi conquest of nice, civilized, Western Europe places like Belgium and Holland and France. Who was rounding up the Jews? Local people, often. In France they were rounding them up faster than the Nazis could handle them. The Nazis also used Jews to control Jews.

If the United States was conquered by the Russians, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Elliott Abrams and the rest of them would probably be working for the invaders, sending people off to concentration camps, They're the right personality types.

That's the traditional pattern. Invaders quite typically use collaborators to run things for them. They very naturally play upon any existing rivalries and hostilities to get one group to work for them against others.

It's happening right now with the Kurds. The West is trying to mobilize Iraqi Kurds to destroy Turkish Kurds, who are by far the largest group and historically the most oppressed. Apart from what we might think of those guerrillas, there's no doubt that they had substantial popular support in southeastern Turkey.

(Turkey's atrocities against the Kurds haven't been covered much in the West, because Turkey is our ally. But right into the Gulf War they were bombing in Kurdish areas, and tens of thousands of people were driven out.)

Now the Western goal is to use the Iraqi Kurds as a weapon to try and restore what's called "stability"—meaning their own kind of system—in Iraq. The West is using the Iraqi Kurds to destroy the Turkish Kurds, since that will extend Turkey's power in the region, and the Iraqi Kurds are cooperating.

In October 1992, there was a very ugly incident in which there was a kind of pincers movement between the Turkish army and the Iraqi Kurdish forces to expel and destroy Kurdish guerrillas from Turkey.

Iraqi Kurdish leaders and some sectors of the population cooperated because they thought they could gain something by it. You could understand their position—not necessarily approve of it, that's another question—but you could certainly understand it.

These are people who are being crushed and destroyed from every direction. If they grasp at some straw for survival, it's not surprising even if grasping at that straw means helping to kill people like their cousins across the border.

That's the way conquerors work. They've always worked that way. They worked that way in India.

It's not that India was a peaceful place before—it wasn't. Nor was the western hemisphere a pacifist utopia. But there's no doubt that almost everywhere the Europeans went they raised the level of violence to a significant degree. Serious military historians don't have any doubts about that—it was already evident by the eighteenth century. Again, you can read it in Adam Smith.

One reason for that is that Europe had been fighting vicious, murderous wars internally. So it had developed an unsurpassed culture of violence. That culture was even more important than the technology, which was not all that much greater than other cultures.

The description of what the Europeans did is just monstrous. The British and Dutch merchants—actually merchant warriors—moved into Asia and broke into trading areas that had been functioning for long, long periods, with pretty well-established rules. They were more or less free, fairly pacific—sort of like free-trade areas.

The Europeans destroyed what was in their way. That was true over almost the entire world, with very few exceptions. European wars were wars of extermination. If we were to be honest about that history, we would describe it simply as a barbarian invasion.

The natives had never seen anything like it. The only ones who were able to fend it off for a while were Japan and China. China sort of made the rules and had the technology and was powerful, so they were able to fend off Western intervention for a long time. But when their defenses finally broke down in the nineteenth century, China collapsed.

Japan fended it off almost entirely. That's why Japan is the one area of the Third World that developed. That's striking. The one part of the Third World that wasn't colonized is the one part that's part of the industrialized world. That's not by accident.

To strengthen the point, you need only look at the parts of Europe that were colonized. Those parts—like Ireland—are much like the Third World. The patterns are striking. So when people in the Third World blame the history of imperialism for their plight, they have a very strong case to make.

It's interesting to see how this is treated in the West these days. There was an amazing article in the *Wall Street Journal* [of January 7, 1993] criticizing the intervention in Somalia. It was by Angelo Codevilla, a so-called scholar at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, who says: Look, the problem in the world is that Western intellectuals hate their culture and therefore they terminated colonialism. Only civilizations of great generosity can undertake tasks as noble as colonialism, which tries to rescue barbarians all over the world from their miserable fate. The Europeans did it—and of course gave them enormous gifts and benefits. But then these Western intellectuals who hate their own cultures forced them to withdraw. The result is what you now see.

You really have to go to the Nazi archives to find anything comparable to that. Apart from the stupendous ignorance—ignorance so colossal that it can only appear among respected intellectuals—the moral level is so low you'd have to go to the Nazi archives. And yet this is an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*. It probably won't get much criticism.

It was interesting to read the right-wing papers in England—the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Daily Telegraph*—after Rigoberta Menchu [a Guatemalan Indian activist and author] won the Nobel Prize. They, especially their Central America correspondent, were infuriated. Their view is: True, there were atrocities in Guatemala. But either they were carried out by the left-wing guerrillas or they were an understandable response by the respectable sectors of the

society to the violence and atrocities of these Marxist priests. So to give a Nobel Prize to the person who's been torturing the Indians all these years, Rigoberta Menchu...

It's hard for me to reproduce this. You have to read the original. Again, it's straight out of the Stalinist and Nazi archives—at their worst. But it's very typical of elements of British and American culture.

### **The roots of racism**

*All over the world—from LA to the Balkans to the Caucasus to India—there's a surge of tribalism, nationalism, religious fanaticism, racism. Why now?*

First of all, let's remember that it's always been going on.

*I grant you that, but it seems more pronounced.*

In parts of the world it's more pronounced. Take Eastern Europe. Europe is altogether a very racist place, even worse than the US, but Eastern Europe is particularly ugly. That society traditionally had very bitter ethnic hatreds. One of the reasons why many of us are here is that our grandparents fled from that.

Up until a couple of years ago, Eastern Europe was under the control of a very harsh tyranny—the Soviet system. It immobilized the civil society, which meant that it eliminated what was good, but it also suppressed what was bad. Now that the tyranny is gone, the civil society is coming back—including its warts, of which there are plenty.

Elsewhere in the world, say in Africa, there are all kinds of atrocities. They were always there. One of the worst atrocities was in the 1980s. From 1980 to 1988, US-backed South Africa was responsible for about a million and a half killings, plus about sixty billion dollars worth of damage—and that's only in the region surrounding South Africa.

Nobody here cared about that, because the US was backing it. If you go back to the 1970s in Burundi, there was a huge massacre, tens of thousands of people killed. Nobody cared.

In Western Europe, there's an increase in regionalism. This in part reflects the decline of their democratic institutions. As the European Community slowly consolidates towards executive power, reflecting big economic concentrations, people are trying to find other ways to preserve their identity. That leads to a lot of regionalism, with both positive and negative aspects. That's not the whole story, but a lot of it.

*Germany had the most liberal asylum policies in the world—now they want to limit civil liberties, and ban political parties.*

There's a lot of talk about German racism, and it's bad enough. For example, kicking out the Gypsies and sending them off to Romania is a scandal you can't even describe. The Gypsies were treated just like the Jews in the Holocaust, but nobody's batting an eyelash about that because nobody gives a damn about the Gypsies.

But we should remember that there are other things going on too, which are getting less publicity. Take Spain. It was admitted into the European Community with some conditions. One was that it's to be a barrier to the hordes of North Africans whom the Europeans are afraid will flock up to Europe.

There are plenty of boat people trying to get across the narrow distance between North Africa to Spain—kind of like Haiti and the Dominican Republic. If they make it, the boat people are immediately expelled by the Spanish police and navy. It's very ugly.

There are, of course, reasons why people are going from Africa to Europe and not the other direction. There are five hundred years of reasons for that. But it's happening, and Europe doesn't want it. They want to preserve their wealth and keep the poor people out.

The same problem is occurring in Italy. The Lombard League, which includes a kind of neofascist element, won a recent electoral victory. It reflects northern Italian interests. They don't want to be saddled with the poor people in the south of Italy. And they're concerned about the North Africans coming up from the south, drifting up through Sicily into Italy. The north Italians don't want them—they want rich white people.

*That brings in the whole question of race and racism and how that factored into the relationship between the North and the South.*

There has always been racism. But it developed as a leading principle of thought and perception in the context of colonialism. That's understandable. When you have your boot on someone's neck, you have to justify it. The justification has to be their depravity.

It's very striking to see this in the case of people who aren't very different from one another. Take a look at the British conquest of Ireland, the earliest of the Western colonial conquests. It was described in the same terms as the conquest of Africa. The Irish were a different race. They weren't human. They weren't like us. We had to crush and destroy them.

*Some Marxists say racism is a product of the economic system, of capitalism. Would you accept that?*

No. It has to do with conquest, with oppression.

If you're robbing somebody, oppressing them, dictating their lives, it's a very rare person who can say: "Look, I'm a monster. I'm doing this for my own good." Even Himmler didn't say that.

A standard technique of belief formation goes along with oppression, whether it's throwing them in gas chambers or charging them too much at a corner store, or anything in between. The standard reaction is to say: "It's their depravity. That's why I'm doing it. Maybe I'm even doing them good."

If it's their depravity, there's got to be something about them that makes them different from me. What's different about them will be whatever you can find.

*And that's the justification.*

Then it becomes racism. You can always find something—they have a different color hair or eyes, they're too fat, or they're gay. You find something that's different enough. Of course you can lie about it, so it's easier to find.

Take the Serbs and the Croats. They're indistinguishable. They use a different alphabet, but they speak the same language. They belong to different branches of the Catholic Church. That's about it. But many of them are perfectly ready to murder and destroy each other. They can imagine no higher task in life.