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Review / Reseña

Aviva Chomsky, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

The Perils and Promises of Global History: New Ideas on a Usable Past

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The central arguments that inform Aviva Chomsky's *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class* are that "labor history is at heart of understanding globalization (4)," that this process—seeking to maximize profits and degrade labor by cycles of immigration and deindustrialization and out-sourcing—has been playing itself out for at least a hundred years, that the textile industry has been a key bellwether of this process, and that through a complex intertwined

study of New England and Colombia new light can be shed on the process of globalization and the making of a global working class.

From the beginning of Chomsky's study it is clear that she is not writing her history primarily for her fellow historians, but for the engaged student—and for the engaged teacher—to re-conceptualize the past and to re-think contemporary received wisdom about reigning economic systems. Indeed, in her opening remarks she makes this explicit. Frustrated with teaching students who come into her classroom with "unexamined ideas and preconceptions" about the process of globalization, Chomsky is writing the book to "challenge...fundamentally flawed and historically inaccurate" worldviews. The central worldview she challenges is the ahistorical belief that assumes that while industrialization has brought security and wealth to the developed world, the poorer regions have languished because "their populations lack the initiative, and have allowed themselves to be governed by corrupt leaders." Despite aid proffered by the wealthy regions, it has so far failed from such systemic character failures in the poorer regions. Nonetheless, this reasoning holds in the argument for globalization, there is no alternative: the solution lies in helping poor countries integrate more fully into the global economy.

The only systematic mainstream alternatives to this worldview is, according to Chomsky, framed by a nativist perspective that argues that immigration and cheap imports threaten jobs and undermine domestic industry. Globalization, then, "will dissipate or undermine the advantages that the United States has attained so it should be reined in to protect these advantages."

> This book suggests a different perspective on globalization, one that requires that we question some of the basic premises that have informed the debate. First it assumes that economic integration among regions is in fact the *cause* of the regional inequalities that characterize the world today. Unequal exchange allowed some regions to industrialize while others did not. It focuses, however, on the process of industrialization from the middle nineteenth century on. From its inception, the factory system has depended on, and re-created, regional inequalities in order to strengthen its control over labor. Producers have used two basic methods to do this: bringing workers from poor regions to the site of production and moving the site of production to where poorer workers are available. That is, immigration and capital flight (1-3)...

But Chomsky is clearly casting a still wider net. She continues in her introductory remarks that "for workers and unions, the question of how to confront immigration and capital flight (deindustrialization)" has been the key to developing survival strategies (4). It becomes clear as her study unfolds that it is not only the engaged student and teacher but also workers and trade union activists to whom her work is intended. She makes it equally clear that she has crafted her work to create a 'usable past' for us to imagine and help us work towards a better future. This historical project—making a 'usable past'—is often demeaned by many mainstream historians who often are inclined to disdain, or wish to "complicate," such historical narratives that have Chomsky's mundane and "presentist" aims.

If you share those objections this book is not for you.

The Structures of Linked Labor Histories*: Part One*

Linked Labor Histories opens with an introduction that sets out the work's complex and somewhat intimidating schema. Using three themes (migration, labor-management collaboration, and global economic restructuring), Chomsky introduces multiple case histories that stretch over more than a hundred years and across thousands of miles and, to thicken the broth, will follow several basic commodity chains. These themes, case histories, and economic processes, she assures us, are all inter-related. At first blush, the linkages seem somewhat forced and tenuous and the project appears, perhaps, too ambitious. But this set of ideas that attempts to weave the struggle of textile workers in late 19th century New England and the struggles of banana and coal workers in Colombia at the turn of the 21st century into part of the same neoliberal globalizing cloth is sufficiently audacious to justify a respectful read.

The first part of the book is devoted to an examination of New England textile plants and the forces that helped to shape them. The first two chapters trace out these mills from their austerely utopian beginnings to the emergence—in the first decades of the twentieth century—of an increasingly immigrant-based and radical work force that collided repeatedly with management over fundamental issues of production standards, speed-up, underemployment, union representation and, finally,

questions of moving the plants to the southern part of the U.S., where labor was cheaper, racially divided, and disorganized. Along the way, Chomsky explores how issues of patriotism and "Americanism" were contested by labor and management, particularly at moments of acute class struggle, and how the radical influences of the International Workers of the World (IWW), the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU) and native American radical and southern European anarcho-syndicalist traditions shaped key strikes of the era.

Chapter two takes a detailed look into a Salem, Massachusetts' cotton mill (the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company) and the "complex dynamic among the workers, management, the union, and the city as they struggled, variously, to maintain profits, productivity, and decent working conditions and resist the relentless race to the bottom" (48). This is a tale of radical—and successful—strikes, new Taylor-like stratagems of "scientific management," and the growing stratification and class collaboration on the part of the workers' union. And because of this dynamic—and shifting national and global economic conditions—the mill owners begin to consider and then employ strategies of deindustrialization, finally moving the New England mills down to the Deep South. Along this sometimes twisting and complex narrative, Chomsky offers intriguing comparisons between the use of the southern part of the US in this period and subsequent Free Trade Zones (FTZ) in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. More provocatively, she makes the argument that this process in the beginning decades of the twentieth century is really the beginning of neoliberalism. This periodization, of course, pre-dates neoliberalism's traditional advent by over a half century and still, I think, needs to be proved. (The conventional view is that neoliberalism really emerges in the early 1980s; another interpretation locates its birth in the years immediately following Pinochet's coup in Chile; Chomsky—looking, perhaps, at deeper patterns—sees its emergence in the beginning of the twentieth century.)

By mid-century, new textile mills were well established in the southern U.S., to exploit cheaper, less organized labor markets. Soon, with regional differentials in labor, the points of production moved even farther

south, into parts of Latin America. Chapter three begins to make the linkages between Latin American and U.S. labor, and the key role that the U.S. government played in the post World War II period in shifting from "extraction or production of raw materials" of Latin America to having Latin America "serve as a source of investment and profit on the production of manufactured goods" (96). To this end, "by orchestrating global inequality and facilitating capital mobility, the U. S. government helped to increase businesses' lever over labor" (98). Lockwood Greene & Company, for example, relocated to Spartanburg, South Carolina and by the 1990s had opened up subsidiaries in Puerto Rico, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. Conventional wisdom often blames union militancy for the flight of the industry to "cheaper, more flexible climates." Chomsky argues in this chapter that "the history of the textile industry, in fact, shows that unions have more often made huge concessions, often futile, to keep industries in place" (100). Union militancy, she argues, is less a factor to runaway shops then is often argued. At any rate, she illustrates this trend in case histories of Puerto Rico (with Operation Bootstrap), Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. And here, the role of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), along with the AFL-CIO, played a collaborative role in sweetheart contracts abroad and racist discrimination at home as the U.S. government encouraged outsourcing and many textile plants, followed by capital investment, went to Asia. Among the key insights that Chomsky teases out in this argument is the role that the U.S. military played in developing and structuring the textile industry. She uses as an example the morphing of Textron (primarily textiles) to Bell Textron (a charter member of the military-industrial complex). "The U.S. military," Chomsky asserts "has been a key, if often ignored player in the process of globalization" (129). The concluding pages of this chapter detail—in a variation of Chomsky's father's ideas about the "manufacturing of consent—" how Roger Milliken (a leading executive in the textile industry), the Pioneer Fund, and the American Textile Manufacturers Institute played a key role in the 1980s of simultaneously taking advantage of global opportunities abroad while mobilizing anti-immigrant and nationalist and chauvinist ideas at home. This, indeed, made for "strange bedfellows" (131-134). The

chapter concludes, after some brief remarks about NAFTA and CAFTA, with this reiteration:

> Governments do not play a diminished role, as is commonly asserted, in the current complex of globalization. On the contrary, governments played a key role in constructing the system, and they play a key role in maintaining it. They create tax structures and legislative apparatus, they serve as the major market for many products, and they provide the physical [military] force necessary to enforce the regional inequalities that are at the heart of the system. (138)

While we expect this from multinational capital and its tools, the shame of it all, Chomsky reminds us, is that up until recently U.S. labor played a key and collaborative role in this process.

Chapter 4, "Invisible Workers in a Dying Industry," is animated by expanding on the question of how "New England employers have used regional and global inequalities to manipulate the domestic labor market through the cycle of industrialization and deindustrialization, and how unions have often failed to take advantage of potential alliances with new immigrants fighting for labor rights" (142-143). After a prescriptive aside about immigration restrictions in the U.S., Chomsky gives an overview of class consciousness among the U.S. working class and its composition, particularly in the textile industry, and how it shifted from "radical immigrants to anti-immigrant Americans" (147-151) and then examines how in a post-industrial landscape new global shifts in production have led to new migrant streams from Latin America occupying positions throughout the textile plants of the Atlantic states of the U.S., in particular many Puerto Ricans in the New York area and then Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Colombians up into New England mills. The new workers occupied jobs that already had been degraded by deindustrialization and global wage differentials and for several decades, these workers were seen by the AFL-CIO as a threat rather than as a natural ally in the ongoing struggle to improve conditions for workers in the industrial, post-industrial, and service sectors.

The structures of Linked Labor Histories*: Part Two*

The second part of the book, composed of three chapters, links the labor history of the US to that of Colombia. Chapter five—"The Cutting Edge of Globalization"—examines how domestic migration patterns in Colombia, particularly in the Urabá (a banana growing region with high US investment and an extraordinary level of paramilitary violence against labor) combined with threats of disinvestment led, in turn, to the "domestication" of one of the key unions among banana workers in the region. This violence and economic strategy is what Chomsky calls the "flip side of globalization":

> (I)f the New England cases illustrate the departure of capital from an industrialized region, the Colombian cases illustrate the attempts to create a neoliberal paradise to attract capital. Or they could be seen as a continuation and recapitulation of patterns that emerged in the struggles that emerged in the struggles of New England textile workers. They are both, and they are also linked in a multitude of chronological, conceptual, and direct ways. (182)

The rest of the chapter makes the argument that human rights violations, death squads, massacres, forced displacements, and killings of journalists, unionists, and human rights activists in the Urabá are an "integral part of the economic model [U.S.-based] of globalization." Chomsky illustrates the linked history of this process by recapitulating the history of the Boston-based United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands), from establishing a banana zone from 1945 to 1960 to the *guerra sindical* and the arrival of the first paramilitaries in the 1980s to the uneasy and coerced labor peace in the 1990s. Along the way, many oppositional forces are either killed off or co-opted, as one unionist said, "to see that the boss was not an enemy [but] he was a partner" (211). This co-optation by the turn of the century often led to the unions collaborating with both the Colombian military and with death squads. Ironically, in this process, because of U.S. conceptual and material support of these policies, "U.S. workers and citizens [become] complicit in creating the very conditions that have led U.S. jobs to move abroad" (217).

Chapter six focuses on the question of how U.S. multinationals have worked with the U.S. government and the AFL-CIO to take "care of business" in Colombia. This is a damning portrait of the subordinate role

that U.S. labor (in particular, the AFL-CIO) played until the mid-1990s by acting as an agent of U.S. foreign policy in Colombia and throughout Latin America and the rest of the world. This was a trade unionism that was definitively *not* characterized by the spirit of international solidarity. At various key moments in the development and struggles of Colombian trade unions in the twentieth century, Chomsky documents, the AFL and then the AFL-CIO acted to undermine and discredit Colombian unions while U.S. multinationals reaped large profits from their investments, and the U.S. military provided key logistical help to suppress and divert militant labor actions in various key industries in Colombia. This relationship became formalized in the early 1960s with the AFL-CIO's formation of the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD). AIFLD acted as a direct agent in the coup in Brazil in 1964, in U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s, and in the undermining of independent and leftward leaning Colombian unions from the 1960s to the mid-1990s and, arguably, beyond. These policies helped create conditions in Colombia that weakened labor, increased the repressive apparatus of the state, including paramilitaries, and ensured high returns for U.S. capital. These policies—in the final analysis—would provide support for the Washington Consensus as Colombia became a bulwark of the neoliberal project in the Americas. Only after the dismantling of trade unions at home (the amount of the U.S. work force that was unionized fell from about 36% in 1945 to somewhere around 10% today) did the AFL-CIO begin to act on the knowledge, implicit in the idea of solidarity, that there was a connection between labor strength abroad and the strength of labor at home. By the mid-1990s the AFL-CIO's approach to international questions began to significantly shift. The AFL-CIO began to advocate, in word and deed, broader and less hegemonic strategies of international solidarity for labor organizing drives in the global south. And it began to view the waves of immigrant workers in the U.S. (many from Latin America) as strategic allies in domestic organizing drives. This new direction, still tentative in many of the particulars is perhaps, Chomsky suggests, another more benign aspect of the process of globalization.

The final chapter offers some arguments about neoliberal economics by applying to coal the principal themes already elaborated upon. Initially the discussion of coal production is limited to the largest open-pit coal mine in the world in northern Colombia, the Cerrejón Zona Norte mine, which began as a joint venture between Exxon and the Colombian government (coal is, after oil, Colombia's major export). By the 1990s U.S. mining companies wanted to shift their production from the U.S. to Colombia. Why? "It was cheaper to produce coal in Colombia, where wages were low and regulations lax" and then to import it into the U.S. (265). Indeed, degraded wages and lax regulations were part of the neoliberal covenant. Contrary to many pundits who associate free markets with free societies, "neoliberal economic policies have often been enforced by the most dictatorial and violent of governments" (266). Chomsky cites, in this regard, Pinochet's Chile and Colombia during the past two decades and enumerates not only the devastation in the wake of Cerrejón mine to the environment but the violent repression dealt out to the indigenous, to local peasants, and to coal miners around the mine. Leaders of the miners unions (among other unions) were among the principal victims killed by right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia. These attacks led the United Mine Workers of America to extend solidarity to Colombian coal miners. As these attacks rose in violence, between 1998 and 2004 (a period when neoliberal policies were celebrated in both Colombia and the U.S.) Colombian coal imports rose from 3.5 to 16.6 million short tons (267). During this same time, there were increased layoffs of coal miners in the U.S. Shifting back to textiles in the global economy, Chomsky remarks on U.S. labor's vacillating position:

> (T)he U.S. labor movement is still grappling with the contradictions inherent in its position of global and even domestic privilege, its definition of its constituency, and its moral compass. Textile unions were the first to confront the stark reality of runaway plants, first inside and then outside the United States. But their experiences, successes, and failures have not been systematically interrogated for their relevance to unions in today's globalized world. (286)

Chomsky closes her book with some general observations about the tasks of labor today and, because of the "existence of regional and global inequalities that exert downward pressure on wages and working wages of

working conditions," the centrality of thinking outside of national narratives. "It has become a truism to note that if corporations have become global, unions must also implement global strategies" (296-297). And, she concludes, in that struggle "Colombia is one of the key battlegrounds where the future of workers everywhere is being fought at the dawn of the twenty-first century (298). Chomsky has written this book in the hope that "(u)nderstanding how inequality has been created and who it has benefited can help us find ways to challenge it" (304). She closes the book as she opens it by challenging her readers to imagine a different and better future.

A usable past

This project, with its subtitle, clearly brings to mind the work of E.P. Thompson and in particular *The Making of the English Working Class*. First, it is informed by a supple but foundational Marxist analysis. Second, it is concerned with the process of creation of class in new relations of capital and labor and relations of production. Third, it attempts to weave together disparate parts of society into a potential alliance that can confront novel and seemingly inexorable economic forces (in Thompson's case, the identity of interests of artisanal weavers in England, the Luddite movement, and the poet William Blake and the early Romantic critique of and against industrial capitalism; in Chomsky's case, the identity of interests—across geography and chronology—of mill workers in New England, textile workers in the southern U.S., banana workers in Colombia's Urabá region and later, mineworkers in Colombia's northern coals mines and their struggles against relentless forces of globalization). But Chomsky's history has very different ends than Thompson. And she is explicit about it. She wants to write for her students in order to de-mystify the constellation of ideas about free markets that her students have breathed in since infancy. To that end, she wants to explicate how the coercive arm of a bourgeois state is not "natural" but contrived to further specific material ends. She wants to write for her colleagues who have forgotten, through the diseased and distorting gossamer of academic discourse, the sufferings and strivings of the world as it was and as it is. She

implicitly prods us to engage in the world outside the once towered and ivied academy. And, perhaps most of all, she—heretic that she is—writes a monograph to those outside of the academy, to those trade unionists and class-conscious workers in order to illuminate the thoughts and actions of those who came before them to guide them towards—and to better imagine—a better future. This was, in practice, the goal of Thompson's pedagogy but his finest work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, which was read more by like-minded academics and armchair Marxists who were still proliferating in the 1963. By 2008, the year Chomsky's history was published, the Marxist school of thought in the academy has seen its ranks dramatically diminish. Analytical modes have shifted from structural analysis to postmodernism, from social history and political economy to the vagaries of transnationalism and discourse analysis. For most academics, for most historians, the idea of class struggle and imperialism are viewed as anachronistic tools of analysis, vestiges from the Cold War. Chomsky, however, asserts in her work that these tools are still of great value.

Conclusions

A positive review generally includes, towards the end, exceptions, criticisms, and emendations to the reviewed text. And so I will proceed. I wish there were some basic specialized maps in the book of New England, the United States, and Colombia. I wish that the schema had been less complex and the narrative less polyvalent. I wish that the *testimonios* and biographies at the end of each had been more organically interwoven in the chapters or included at the end in an appendix. I wish there had been an overarching introductory chapter on the role of textiles in the making of the modern world.

That being said, I like this book. I consider it a valuable contribution in the movement to revive (and revise) analytical tools that shed light on the past in order to illuminate the paths we walk today.