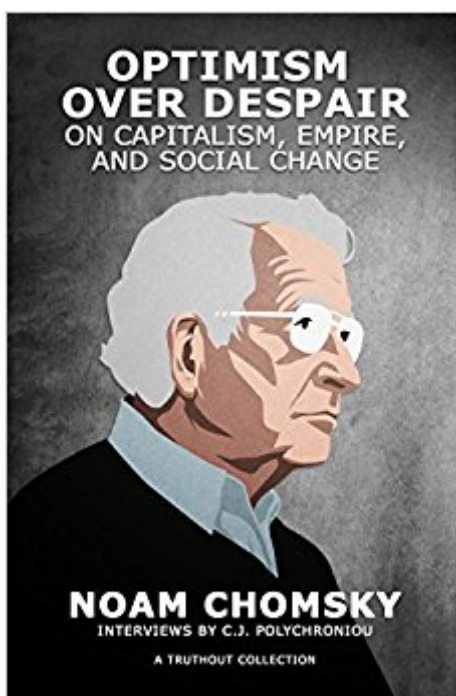


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Optimism Over Despair: On Capitalism, Empire, And Social Change



Synopsis

This volume offers readers a concise and accessible introduction to the ideas of Noam Chomsky, described by the New York Times as "arguably the most important intellectual alive." In these recent, wide-ranging interviews, conducted for Truthout by C. J. Polychroniou, Chomsky discusses his views on the "war on terror" and the rise of neoliberalism, the refugee crisis and cracks in the European Union, prospects for a just peace in Israel/Palestine, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the dysfunctional US electoral system, the grave danger posed to humanity by the climate crisis, and the hopes, prospects, and challenges of building a movement for radical change. Noam Chomsky is Institute Professor (Emeritus) in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT. His work is widely credited with having revolutionized the field of modern linguistics. He is the author of numerous best-selling political works, which have been translated into scores of languages worldwide. C. J. Polychroniou is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers, and popular news websites.

Book Information

Paperback: 180 pages

Publisher: Haymarket Books (August 22, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1608467996

ISBN-13: 978-1608467990

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 1.1 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #11,063 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > War & Peace #14 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Terrorism #23 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Globalization

Customer Reviews

"The elder statesman of a resurgent left offers clear-eyed assessments of the US, past and present, and its role in the world. From meditations on human nature to strategic advice for the Trump era, Chomsky remains the thinker who shaped a generation, a beacon of hope in the darkest of times."

• Sarah Jaffe, *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt* This book of interviews with Noam Chomsky is a must read in these troubling times. Divided into three parts, it begins with Chomsky's razor sharp analysis of neoliberalism, imperialism, the EU, the role of religion in politics, and class polarization. In the second, it focuses on the Trump presidency and lays out the long history of US foreign policy, as well as other topics such as health care, global warming and education policy. Finally, it looks at various alternatives— anarchism, communism and socialism. This is an excellent collection of interviews that highlights Chomsky's encyclopedic knowledge of the key issues of our day and his unwavering criticism of the regime of the global 1%.

• Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* "In this brilliant series of recent and wide-ranging interviews, Noam Chomsky combines an astounding breadth of knowledge, great depth of insight, clarity in explaining his ideas, and a relentless commitment to social and economic justice. The full package is simply exhilarating, especially in our current dismal era of Donald Trump. *Optimism over Despair* is a book to devour.

• Robert Pollin, Distinguished Professor of Economics and Co-Director, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

"Chomsky argues that the choice between optimism and despair is really no choice at all. I have a great admiration for Chomsky's combination of consistent critical moral perspective and sharp eye for the details of world politics.

• Heikki Patomäki, professor of world politics at the University of Helsinki, and a civic and political activist "In this series of highly informative conversations deftly organized by CJ Polychroniou, Noam Chomsky teaches us - yet again - so much on a huge range of issues - from economic globalisation through international politics to the linguistic foundations of humanity. If you haven't read Chomsky before, this book will open your eyes. Even if you have, reading this book will make you realize that you still have more eyes to be opened. This book is a beacon - or, rather a GPS - in this turbulent and darkening world."

• Ha-Joon Chang, University of Cambridge, author of *Bad Samaritans, 23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* and *Economics: The User's Guide* "For all those of us who have always dreamed of spending a day with Noam Chomsky and getting his answers to all our questions and concerns about the (sorry) state of the world, here's the next best thing: a collection of interviews with our greatest living intellectual on capitalism, empire, and social change, fielded by C. J. Polychroniou of Truthout. Especially valuable in helping us navigate the dreadful challenges of the Trumpian era."

• Michael Klare, Professor of Peace & World Security Studies, Hampshire College and Defense Correspondent, *The Nation* "This fascinating series of interviews convincingly covers an astonishing range of

fundamental and urgent issues of societal concern, demonstrating anew that Noam Chomsky is the world's most humane, philosophically sophisticated, and knowledgeable public intellectual. I cannot imagine a better primer for anyone seeking a better, safer, fairer future.

•Richard Falk, Professor of International Law Emeritus, Princeton University

Noam Chomsky is widely regarded to be one of the foremost critics of US foreign policy. Chomsky is Institute Professor (emeritus) in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Laureate Professor of Linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. He has published numerous groundbreaking books, articles, and essays on global politics, history, and linguistics. His recent books include *Masters of Mankind* and *Hopes and Prospects*. Haymarket Books recently released updated editions of twelve of his classic books. C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish.

The dates of the interviews in this book range from 2013 to January 2017 though the majority of them are from 2016. The analysis provided by Chomsky in the book includes the following: Chomsky discusses ISIS. He also focuses on the recent spate of terror attacks in France. He quotes Akbar Ahmed as saying that terrorism has a breeding ground among Muslims in France because of the community's meager access to educational and employment opportunities along with the contempt radiated toward them by white French society. He quotes Scott Atran as noting that Muslims make up 7 to 8 percent of France's population but constitute 60 to 70 percent of its prison population. He quotes Akbar as arguing that ISIS may claim responsibility for some attacks which they actually are not involved in but wish to take responsibility for because they think it enhances their prestige. The terrorist attack on Nice, France, was perpetrated by a man of North African heritage and claimed responsibility for by ISIS. However, according to Akbar, the perpetrator was not a pious Muslim at all • he ate pork, did drugs and booze, had a

criminal record, didn't regularly attend mosque or fast, etc. ISIS is part of the trend of what Chomsky quotes Patrick Cockburn as calling the "Wahhabization" of Sunni Islam. Chomsky notes that US allies in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have taken the lead over the decades in funding the madrassas, mosques and other organizations throughout the world that have spurred the creation of groups like Al Qaeda. In Syria, US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken the lead in supporting Ahrar Al Sham and the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate Al Nusra. Chomsky notes that the US has seemingly not been entirely without its own direct support for Al Nusra either. Another US ally, Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tyranny, has also encouraged Islamic extremism in Syria, supporting Al Nusra and similar groups. Chomsky observes that the Erdogan regime also appears to have at times tolerated the passage of jihadis through Turkey to join ISIS in Syria. After the ISIS attack on Istanbul, Erdogan denounced Chomsky as an ally of terrorists because Chomsky had signed a petition attacking Erdogan's massive human rights violations against Turkey's Kurds. In this book, Chomsky recalls his response in the Turkish media, which noted Erdogan's assistance to Islamic extremists in Syria, including ISIS, and that such assistance has been used to battle Syria's Kurds, perhaps the strongest bulwark against extremist jihadis in Syria. Erdogan's atrocities against Kurds are nothing new of course; Chomsky mentions in the book as he frequently has elsewhere that in the 1990s the Turkish military massacred tens of thousands of Kurds, destroyed hundreds of thousands of villages and created a massive refugee crisis. Bill Clinton provided massive military aid so Turkey could commit these atrocities. Chomsky notes the courage of activists in Turkey opposing their government's atrocities and has done what he can to help them over the years. Erdogan is still an ally of the west, Chomsky notes, though there has been tension in the relationship. Erdogan seems to perhaps be getting too big for his britches, with his seeming vision of a neo-Ottoman Turkish influence in the Middle East. He made an agreement with Europe that Turkey would contain the flight of miserable Syrian refugees through its territory from reaching Europe. Chomsky observes that this is similar to the Obama administration using Mexico to try to contain the flight of Central American refugees into the United States. On domestic affairs, Chomsky has much to say on recent politics. In 2016, Trump and Bernie Sanders were symptoms of mass revolt against the stagnant wages and declining living standards many Americans have experienced since the 1970s under neoliberal economic policies. Trump's policies, Chomsky observes, are harmful to the well-being of ordinary Americans, including those duped into voting for him. On the other hand Chomsky views Bernie

Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign favorably. He describes Sanders as an honest New Dealer but one who probably couldn't do much if he were elected president. Absent mass movements for change, the Republicans in congress would block his policies, Chomsky says. I wish at this point Chomsky would have also mentioned that the bulk of congressional Democrats probably wouldn't be too eager to support Sanders's policies either, at least absent mass popular pressure on them. Chomsky also refers to health care a bunch of times in the book. He notes that the United States spends much more on health care than other advanced industrial nations but gets poorer outcomes. The United States has a higher infant mortality rate than Cuba. Obamacare has given some amelioration to the situation but the big problems caused by our privatized health care system remain. Chomsky notes that polling showed that a public option had major public support but Obama dropped it and also instituted a provision barring the government from negotiating drug prices downward for Medicare. The latter provision was opposed by 85 percent of Americans. Single payer has always had strong support in the polls as well though it has been impossible to get it passed because of the insurance and pharmaceutical industries influence on the political process. Chomsky quotes Dr. Steffie Woolhandler as arguing that the elimination of the massive administrative costs inherent in our privatized health care system but not in the systems of other advanced industrial countries could provide the funds for a truly universal health care system in this country. Israel-Palestine is a topic also discussed. He mentions that Theodore Meron, legal advisor to Israel's foreign ministry in the 1960s, advised the Israeli government after the 1967 war that civilian settlements in the occupied territories were illegal. Meron also advised what would become standard Israeli strategy to try to minimize the appearance of settlement illegality: build military outposts first and then quietly transform them into civilian settlements. He mentions the episode of December 2016 when Republicans and the Netanyahu government launched a campaign of comical outrage over Obama's decision to abstain on UN Security Council Resolution 2334. Chomsky goes over a couple of the ways Obama provided crucial support to Israel, including during its murderous 2014 assault on Gaza. Chomsky also mentions the alliance of David Friedman, Trump's ambassador to Israel--along with the family of Jared Kushner--with the far right religious wackos in the West Bank settlement of Beth El. Other topics discussed or referred to include how the US has provoked Russia by expanding NATO toward Russia's borders; why it should be not that difficult to have free college in this country; Obama's drone war as the greatest terrorist campaign of our age; the

environmental crisis in light of Trump's election win; some stuff about linguistics; the "American Dream"; Chomsky's negative views on the Bolsheviks; and some brief comments regarding what he thinks about Chinese and Cuban communism. In one chapter, Chomsky discusses the US intervention in the Italian election of 1948 and its subsequent covert spending of tens of millions of dollars to influence Italian politics into the 1970s. This discussion of US intervention in Italy is an attempt to provide a little historical background in light of the hysteria about Russia supposedly intervening to get Trump elected. He also discusses a little about US efforts during the first years of the Cold War (late 1940s) to break progressive workers movements in Europe, under cover of fighting communism. C.J. Polychroniou, Chomsky's interlocutor in this book, states in the introduction that he hopes this volume will serve "to introduce the views and ideas of Noam Chomsky to a new generation of readers." I suppose it does a decent job serving that purpose. This book is not a scholarly work but a book of interviews. The footnotes are very limited in number. But Chomsky in this book is stimulating like he always is. I would certainly encourage people to read all of his political books that they can, particularly the scholarly works.

The usual Chomsky with his view of the world with whom I agree, even because otherwise I wouldn't read his books. My only question is why the title is optimism over despair when, after reading the book, despair overwhelms optimism by far.... Il solito Chomsky con la sua visione del mondo, che io ovviamente condivido altrimenti non leggerei i suoi libri. La mi unica domanda riguarda in effetti il titolo, considerato che dopo aver finito il libro la disperazione superava di gran lunga l'ottimismo....

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