H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Noam Chomsky. *On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures.* Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1987. 140 pp. $13.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89608-289-2; $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89608-290-8.

Reviewed by Ann Rosenthal (Defiance College)
Published on H-PCAACA (January, 1997)

Noam Chomsky on American/Soviet Imperialism

Noam Chomsky presents a classic analysis of war as a cultural phenomenon. The lectures were given at the University of Central America during the context of the Sandinista-United States conflict. They are not, however, simply artifacts of that time.

Chomsky's description of the United States as an aggressor nation against smaller sovereign states is generally viewed as dissident opinion; however, reading this work as such limits its potential value for the cultural scholar. Taken outside the context of the exigency on which it primarily brings a focus, *The Managua Lectures* is best read as a chronicle of the development of war as a twentieth-century, American cultural phenomenon.

Lecture One sets the historical stage by citing the relationship between U.S. aggressive actions and the growth, internationally, of U.S.-based businesses. The problem with Chomsky for most readers is his use of strong, direct language. For example, he proclaims that President Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms as the war aims of the allies in World War II should include "the Fifth Freedom," which he calls the "freedom to rob and to exploit" (p. 7). Chomsky's primary target for criticism is the United States, but he also points out "that nothing in this record is unique to the United States" (p. 11).

In Lecture Two, Chomsky continues the same theme, this time addressing U.S. actions in Third World countries. The containment of internal aggression in small countries is part of a larger need to maintain a position as "Global Enforcer." In the discussion transcript that follows the lecture, Chomsky makes it clear that the Soviet Union's movements into smaller countries are part of the same cultural phenomenon. The two superpowers just exported different commodities.

Lecture Three contains a detailed explanation of U.S. foreign policy in Central America, and Chomsky, here, is both strongest and weakest. The strength of the lecture lies in its well-researched and logically presented case for the author's position. It also contains the strongest and most evocative language, concluding with an impassioned appeal for the audience to reject both the United States' desires and especially the self-fulfilling prophecy of becoming a Soviet state.

Lectures Four and Five examine U.S. national security policy, foreign and domestic policies and their relationships, and the arms race. Chomsky's calls for action have become somewhat dated in the ten years since the lectures were first presented, but the cultural analysis remains provocative.

Of course, Chomsky is a scholar-activist, and, as such, is himself part of the uniqueness of American twentieth-century culture. Reading his highly persuasive writing with any degree of objectivity seems a task doomed to failure. Even so, it is still well worth the effort.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Ann Rosenthal. Review of Chomsky, Noam, *On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=797

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.