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## Interview with Noam Chomsky

Cristina Buarque

### **Noam Chomsky**

is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a political activist.

### **Cristina Buarque**

is Professor in the Department of Political Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

A voice all but ignored by the mass media in the United States, in an ant-like effort of persistence, Noam Chomsky devotes two days every week to political militancy, even if his words barely make a ripple.

During my stay as visiting researcher/professor at New York University, not too far from Chomsky's office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Boston, I decided, very much the dilettante, to e-mail him requesting an interview for the *Revista de Estudos Políticos*. His e-mail was easily attainable through the faculty listing on the MIT website. "Why not give it a shot?" I thought. In my recent experience as the editor of the REP I have adopted a spirit of unabashed prodding and insistence, and learned to temper it by keeping expectations modest as a preemptive antidote for frustration. I have also learned to cope with a collection of answers in the negative as well as forgotten promises (not a few of them!). However, interspersed here and there, some have come in the positive and are not less celebrated. Chomsky's personal reply, less than twenty-four hours later, therefore came as a complete and welcome surprise.

Two months later I made the trip to Boston. An assistant in full control of his schedule had organized a neat line of interviewers in the hallway just outside his office that morning. I was the first one, and a young Muslim lady, tape cassette recorder in hand, stood beside me in second. I had been warned that the interview was not to go beyond the allotted forty minutes. And so it was.

Taken by Chomsky's soothing manner and tranquil elocution as we covered a range subjects, I began hoping there would be some leeway. But an abrupt interruption –

vigorous knocks on the door – stranded me with a list of unanswered questions. Once again I tried my luck with digital correspondence. And once again it worked. I made one last question by e-mail and received an answer promptly.

The interview now in the reader's hands, begins with Chomsky's more general reflections on the scope and boundaries of human knowledge concerning society. In order to discuss ideology, Chomsky shifts to aspects of US politics in the domestic and international context. He comments on the limitations of International Relations theory and its obliviousness to class interest. I then steer the interview to the subject of Brazil and the Dilma Rousseff administration. Chomsky underscores progress made under the leadership of Lula, of whom he seems to nurture a special fondness. He praises some Brazilian actions in the international scene, mentioning its role in Honduras and the attempt to intervene in Iran. However, he laments the UN-mandated mission in Haiti. Despite marked optimism, he underscores the persistence of two large issues: still staggering and social inequality and the alarming threats to the environment. The interview then returns to the United States, its trajectory of development and its waning power in Latin America. We briefly make a stop in the Arab world and its rapport with Iran, with Brazil as a potential mediator in negotiations. At which point the interview is interrupted by the abovementioned rapping at the door, but which continued for a few brief minutes, enough for interesting off the record remarks.

Later, by e-mail, I received the e-mail containing the answer to my question: whether critiques aimed at him every made him reconsider his positions.

Bev Stoll and Diogo Almeida made this encounter happen. Thiago Gomide Nasser transcribed and translated the interview into Portuguese.

**Cristina Buarque**

Prof. Chomsky, thank you very much for agreeing to meet me today.

**Noam Chomsky**

Glad to.

**Cristina Buarque**

To start with, I would like to ask you a question about your views on human knowledge, and its relationship to social issues. You have said in the past that the so-called social sciences are in fact ideological disciplines. With this in mind, there are two parts to this question. The first one is: does this criticism stem from what you perceive to be inherent limitations of their object of study or is this criticism directed to how their object is actually approached?

**Noam Chomsky**

Well, actually, in the latter sense, it would be a criticism. That is, they should be as free as possible in their investigations from the presuppositions and assumptions and framework of beliefs and goals, and so on, that they have. But to say that they have those presuppositions and assumptions and beliefs, is not a criticism... I mean, you can't stop being a human being. And you... what you're gonna look for, the kinds of questions you'll ask, what you'll put aside as irrelevant and so on, is always gonna reflect some... you know, some framework of beliefs and understanding that you bring to the subject, and that's true if you study quantum physics, it's true if you study societies. When it's a matter of studying societies, we tend to call it ideology, so you don't call it ideology when you're studying physics, but... you can't... there is no such thing as inquiry that doesn't

come from some framework that determines what you look at, what you don't look at, what's important.... it's impossible... I mean, you can't inquire otherwise.

**Cristina Buarque**

The second part of that same question is: do you think that learning more about these fields could be relevant to a non-academic who wants to understand the political scenery they live in?

**Noam Chomsky**

Well, I think there's a lot to learn from the study of societies, economies and political systems... how they function, how popular will is related to public policy... I mean... endless number of questions, and the social sciences can – in fact do – contribute to a lot of very useful information... I mean, I use it all the time in my work.

**Cristina Buarque**

Ok, so there is a possible dialogue between these two worlds...?

**Noam Chomsky**

Yeah, I mean...

**Cristina Buarque**

.... non-academic and academic?

**Noam Chomsky**

If I read Political Science Quarterly, I usually learn something relevant, even if I don't agree with the writers.

**Cristina Buarque**

I'd like to shift to a question concerned specifically with political science. Its current understanding was mainly shaped in the behaviorist revolution in the 50s, and this paradigm shift was allegedly motivated by an attempt to render political thinking more objective and less ideological. To that purpose, the dynamics of political institutions started being studied as a largely autonomous and independent phenomenon. What, if any, do you consider to have been the political consequences of this shift?

**Noam Chomsky**

Well, for one thing, I don't think it's a shift towards being less ideological, it's a shift towards being differently ideological. In fact, not really that different, but... So, again, there are issues that are discussed and aren't, I mean... every issue of a journal you read, it becomes obvious. And so, for example, last night I just happened to be reading a... one of the... I think maybe the best journal of international affairs, diplomatic history, which is a very good open journal and they're... they're questioning the concept... there is a series of articles on regionalism, and they're basically questioning the reliance in international relations theory, on notions like national interest, and they're saying "well, this really is a... not a very clear notion, that's omitting a lot of things", and they study some of the things it's omitting, like for example the differences of... in regions.

So... the south in the United States tends to have different concerns than the northeast, which is true, but the crucial issue, the crucial reason why national interest IR theory is kind of missing the point – if you like – is it doesn't consider class interest. So it doesn't consider the crucial difference between... say... the corporate sector and the working class, and their concerns about what policy ought to be, and they're very different. And furthermore, that difference affects policy very directly, because the former are the decision makers, not the latter. But that issue just... it is barely discussed... so you can discuss regional concerns, but as soon as you touch class issues, it's... you're kind of off the spectrum, even though those are critical ones.

Well, that's ideology, it's a set of choices you're making about what you think is important. And it's one that's very closely related to the nature of the society. And so as it shows up, for example, in the social movements, and take, say, the civil rights movement. If you want to study the civil rights – in the United States – if you want to study it seriously, you have to notice a major element of... a crucial element, right at the center. As long as... let's take Martin Luther King as a symbol of the civil rights movement. As long as he was focusing attention on racist sheriffs in Alabama, it was fine for the elite opinion who was honored to.... you know... make a hero, this is Martin Luther King day... and on Martin Luther King day everyone reads his I have a dream speech from 1963, and that's fine.

Well, what happened after 1963? Very quickly he turned attention to two things class issues and the Indochina war, and he was completely smashed, you know.... If you look at what happened after that... you don't read his I have a dream speech in 1968. There was one, in fact, on the day he was assassinated. He was in Memphis, Tennessee, supporting a sanitation workers' strike, and he was about to lead a march from Memphis to Washington, of civil rights activists, where they were organizing... going to organize a sort of a movement of the poor, which... you know there is a race issue, because there is a race-class correlation, but much broader. Well, he was assa... he gave his speech, an eloquent speech, in which he said – he used a biblical analogy – he said “ I feel that I'm like Moses, I can see the Promise land; I'm not going to get there, but you'll get there. And the Promise land will be a land of justice and equality and freedom, and overcoming the class oppression”, and then he was assassinated.

The march nevertheless took place, led by his wife, Coretta King, and they went through the contested regions of the south, the big struggles that they had... they ended up in Washington – I have to recall that this is the most liberal congress in American history – and they set up a tent city in Washington, Resurrection City... Congress ordered the security forces to go in the middle of the night and destroy it and kick it out of town, and they were driven out of town. Ok, that part... all this part of Martin Luther King's legacy is not celebrated on Martin Luther King day, in fact it's considered a kind of a blot on his record, along with his condemnation of the Vietnam war. And that shows, if you look at the effects of the civil rights movement in the north, there are some effects, but it basically goes... continued on very racist lines, because class issues were involved, and that you just don't touch...

In fact I think the United States, some years ago – maybe this is still true – but a few years ago, last time I looked, the United States was one of the very few countries where the Census bureau, which takes detailed statistics on everything you could imagine, doesn't include class. If people try to do studies of, say, class-health relations, and the way they have to do it is by looking at race-health relations, which are studied, and then try to determine the class status of the people of the various races, by other criteria, and indirectly they can get class-health statistics. Well, that's deeply embedded in the culture, for obvious reasons based in the system of power in the society... it affects all work that's done in...in... just about every field. Including, for example, what I described yesterday, that I was reading yesterday; it's just this... it's kind of like a part... it's part of the perspective that intellectuals bring to things. You don't look at it, you know. And it's, by now, deeply embedded in the general culture.

And so, for example, I have a friend who teaches history at a state college, one of the better state colleges. And she told me that she asks – and she's teaching an incoming

class in world history – on the first day she asks students to identify their class, and she says “what class are you in?”, and they have two answers: if your father is a janitor, you’re middle class, if your father is in jail, you’re underclass. That’s... the class structure of the society. Is the national interest of the janitor the same as the CEO? Well, this question doesn’t come up in the study of international affairs and national policy. Ok, that’s... yeah... I mean... It’s not wrong to have a set of assumptions and perspectives, but you should be open and upfront about it. And as soon as you are you can see how much... how much the set of assumptions that’s generally – not universally – but generally brought to studies does reflect the structure of power inside the society. Well, that should be a central topic of study. It’s not... I don’t want to say it’s ignored, like you can find discussion of it – but it should be right at the center.

**Cristina Buarque**

So, I’d like to change gears a bit and talk about Brazil. It’s been ten years now that the Workers’ Party has been in power. Our former president, Lula, has ended his second term with record popularity ratings, and our current president, Dilma Rousseff, has been extremely popular since she was sworn in. And it does not seem unreasonable to imagine that we may still have another four years with Dilma from 2014 on. So... what challenges, if any, does such a long stay in power pose to the different segments of the Brazilian Left, such as the different social and environmental movements, unions, and so on?

**Noam Chomsky**

Well, I knew Lula somewhat before he was elected and I have very high opinion of him, and... in the early... his early programs have... I did join those who were critical of them, felt they should have moved more towards social issues rather than paying off the banks. But, in retrospect, I think he made choices that were defensible, maybe not the best... But I think things have... you know, by comparative standards, I think, things worked out moderately well, could have been better, but... what couldn’t? Considering the pressures in the choices, maybe this was a reasonable thing to do. There are very serious issues, and they remain. I mean, for one thing, Brazil remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. I mean, it’s... little improved, because of the... the support programs, which didn’t help people. But the gulf between the very wealthy and the huge mass of impoverished people is enormous.

The environmental problems are serious. I mean, the... destruction of the Amazonian region continues... yeah... it’s a problem not only for Brazil but for the world. The Amazon is kind of an oxygen source for the entire world. The logging is very dangerous, it’s very harmful to the indigenous people. There is some effort to protect the indigenous people, it’s good that there’s some effort, but it’s by no means enough. Before Lula’s election, I happened to meet with MST leaders, and I asked about their relation to the PT. They said that they’re not part of it, you know, they have the wrong goals and concerns, they may have sympathetic cooperation on some issues but they’re keeping separate from it. And I think their issues have not really been addressed; it’s the most important popular movement in the world, I think, has done very significant things, but it remains an outside movement which... with aspirations that are not fulfilled.

And there are a lot of interesting things going on in Brazil, but aren’t necessarily... aren’t government policies, like participatory budgeting, for example, it’s an important development, things like that could spread and be significant... So it’s an exciting place.

I think there are... there's nothing new, but there are real problems with the development model. I mean, a development model that's based on... primarily on... primary product.... The export is... first of all it's not stable, but it also is.... it can be harmful. It yields what's called the resource curse... you know, it distorts currencies, it undermines domestic production... you're relying more and more on import of foreign goods and so on. I don't think any developed country ever developed that way, certainly the United States didn't... it's a... and I think that's a fundamental problem that has to be resolved.

Actually, the US model is kind of an interesting one. For a century, Brazil has been called the potential colossus of the south, you know, corresponding to the colossus of the north. So how does the colossus of the north get to be colossus of the north? Well, it was given. Back at the time, in the American Revolution, there was economic advice given, advice on what's called sound economics. In fact the principles that the IMF and the Washington, the Treasury's Department, and that economics professors still give, it was given by Adam Smith, a good source. They instructed the colonies that they should follow the laws of sound economics, and they should keep to what was later called their comparative advantage, which was a production of primary products, and they should import from England, its superior industrial goods, manufactured goods, at that time primitive manufacturing, but it was there.

They should certainly not try to impose tariffs and develop their own industry competitive with England. And crucially they should not try to monopolize the central commodities – and remember the essential commodity, in that period, was cotton. Cotton was the oil of the early industrial revolution, which took off from textiles and so on - so we shouldn't monopolize cotton. That was the advice, and that's sound economics, right out of the Washington consensus today. Well, the colonies were independent, and so they were free to violate all the principles of sound economics, which they did.

They immediately established high tariffs, to bar superior British manufacturers, and that enabled the beginning of the textile industry, which is the beginning of economic development... The spin offs from that, the things that provide the industry with needed materials and so on... went on through developing a steel industry, rejecting superior British steel, developing their own steel industry. Meanwhile, they went on to try to monopolize cotton, and that was the reason for the... the primary reason for the annexation of Texas and the invading... the conquest of half of Mexico, it was an open effort to try to monopolize cotton... They didn't quite make it but came close. And the purpose of that was... both for industrial development... for domestic development, but also for international reasons – you have to recall in those days the big enemy was Britain - they had the big Army and big Navy and so on, they were... constraining the colonies, that's why... they tried several times but they never conquered Canada, because the British were on their way, they couldn't conquer Cuba, because the British Navy was on the way...

So if you look back in the 1840s, the presidents were openly saying "if we can monopolize cotton, we can bring Britain to our feet, because we'll control their main economic resources". In fact what they were trying to do, just what was charged ridiculously, to Saddam Hussein, when they invaded Kuwait, of course it was outlandish but (the charge) was trying to monopolize oil. Well that's just what the American colonies did, exactly the opposite of the precepts of sound economics, and the country developed, by the late 19th century it was the richest country in the world, it had rich agricultural, mineral, other resources, but did develop industrially, and in fact, this is not unique. Every developed country, starting with England, has followed pretty much the same course. So, reliance on

primary commodity production has never worked, and there's no reason to believe it ever will, so I think... it's a mixed story in Brazil, it does have industry and so on, but there's a question about the direction the economy ought to take, and there's plenty of questions about the fundamentally internal and social problems in Brazil. Some steps have been made, but... long way to go.

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**Cristina Buarque**

As you have noted repeatedly in the past, the last ten years in Latin America have been characterized by increasing unification and integration, which you view as pre-requisites for independence. Brazil is undoubtedly a major element in this movement, and it has aspirations of leadership in the region, as can be seen, for instance, in the mediating role it took during the Honduran coup, and its presence in Haiti. In parallel to these regional aspirations, Brazil has also made explicit its global ambitions, as can be seen for instance in the bid for a permanent seat in the UN security council, and the mediating role it tried to take in 2010, during the dispute over Iran's nuclear energy program. Considering there is a fine line between cooperative leadership and politics of imposition, how do you think Brazil's regional and global aspirations will affect the integration process in Latin America?

**Noam Chomsky**

Well, as always, I think it's a mixed record, so I think a lot of the things you mentioned are quite positive and constructive, like with regard to Honduras... it didn't work, but Brazil did have a positive role, same with regard to agreement with Turkey and Iran on low enriched uranium... which was actually an interesting incident, because Brazil was following a policy recommended by the United States, in fact, after the diplomatic flap, Brazil released a letter that Obama had written to Lula recommending exactly what they did. As soon as they did it, the US backed off and rammed through a security council resolution which undermined the effort, which could have resolved – or at least mitigated – whatever conflict there is over Iran but... it was a failed step but a good one.

On the other hand, Haiti is a different story. I think the multinational force in Haiti, the MINUSTAH, has a very spotty and quite negative role, in fact a large part of the population wants them out, because they are a destructive occupying force, so that's a different, different issue. Quite apart from the fact that it did introduce cholera into the country... not Brazil, but the force did. So it's, it's... generally... again, by comparative standards, one of the better records in the world, maybe the best, but not spotless. As far as Latin America is concerned, I think it's quite dramatic what's happened in the past ten years... it has... you said... you know, this used to be the US backyard, used to be that... we have practical sovereignty over the continent and our law is fiat over the continent, Richard Olney, which was only... as late as 1973, when the Nixon administration was planning the overthrow of the Chilean government, the National Security Council warned that... if we can't control Latin America, how are we gonna control the rest of the world? Well, that's all in the past. In the last ten years, the United States has not controlled of Latin America... and South America has pulled out very extensively; there's no military basis left, for example. The United States still has plenty of military personnel operating, mainly in Colombia, and in fact building it up, but it's a very different picture from what it was 15 years ago. And in fact it became very striking at the Cartagena conference just a couple of weeks ago, the hemispheric conference and the summit which was held in Colombia, it never came out with a formal declaration, and the reason is they couldn't reach agreement on the major issues, and one major issue was admission of Cuba, which

the US just vetoed.... rest of the hemisphere wanted them in... not Canada, US and Canada rejected it, over the overwhelming support of the rest of the hemisphere – Brazil leading the way – and it's very unlikely that there will be another meeting, unless Cuba is admitted, so that was one thing; the other was drugs. Most of the hemisphere wants to move towards decriminalization, the United States and Canada flatly reject it. Now, the drug problem is very serious for Latin America. I mean, Mexico... it's a monstrosity... in Colombia is part of the... is one major part of the reason why maybe 150,000 people have been killed by paramilitaries in recent years, according to the attorney general... not a small thing. Same elsewhere. But the US is adamant, and the problem is, in the United States, both a demand problem for drugs, and a supply problem, something which is rarely discussed... that the guns mostly come from the United States. And we have statistics for Mexico, because it studied the bureau of alcohol and tobacco and fire arms, the US government bureau does collect guns in Mexico that are confiscated and studied, and their latest report found that about 70% are coming from the United States. And, furthermore, their composition has changed. So, a couple of years ago, they maybe were pistols, now they're assault rifles, and next year there'll be more. That's a problem internal to the United States; you and I can walk into a store in Arizona and pick up an assault rifle and hand it over to our friendly Mexican cartel member, who will pay for it and ship it across the border, and Mexico's suffering from that; there are 50,000 people killed in the country, being thorn to shreds, and it goes right down the hemisphere, so... the Mexican Presidents... I haven't seen a poll, but I assume a large part of the population wants to move towards decriminalization. US flatly refuses... end result... no... no announcement from the conference. Well, I think this is a step towards what's likely to happen, namely, it's very likely that the OAS - Organization of American States – will decline or maybe disappear, US-run basically, and will be replaced by something like CELAC – the recently formed organization of Caribbean and Latin American countries – which excludes the US and Canada. But that would have been unimaginable, 15 or 20 years ago, let alone 50 years ago. That's a major change in world affairs, and for Latin America, it's really of historic importance; this is after all the first time since the Spanish and Portuguese explorers came, some 500 years ago... it's the first time that there are successful moves, there have been attempts, but the first time there's successful moves towards some kind of integration, like UNASUR or commercial relations and so on, and a degree of... a significant degree of independence. It's a major change in world affairs and, for Latin America, extremely important. And it could be... and partially is, the basis for facing the real scandal of Latin America. I mean, Latin America is very rich, it's potentially a very rich area. So for example if you compare it with east Asia, it has enormous advantages... resources, no conflicts, no major conflicts, and so on. But East Asia has... developed, and Latin America hasn't. And if you look at the reasons, which have been studied, they're pretty straightforward. In Latin America... the internal structure of the societies is... over... quite generally is a very wealthy, a very small, Europeanized... sometimes white, elite, and a huge mass of poverty. And the Europeanized elite is internationally-oriented, not domestically-oriented. One consequence is that the countries don't have much to do with each other. Even the road systems... I was in northern Chile a couple of years ago, in a meeting with Aymara indians, who were very concerned that their community may in fact disappear and maybe the language will disappear; you take a look where they are... now there's a road that goes

right into Bolivia, where the Aymara indians are running the country, but the connections are so... so much broken, you know, due to war, you know, won by England, a century ago, that they don't even communicate, you know... That's being overcome... Others effects are revealed simply by comparing import. So imports into East Asia tend to be capital goods, designated for industrial development; imports into Latin America have typically been concentrated in luxury goods, and for the tiny elite.

And same with capital flight, capital export... where you send your children to go to college or whatever it may be... So East Asia developed pretty much the United States did, by violating all the laws of sound economics, while Latin America has maybe been the most faithful servant of the IMF, and earlier colonial arrangements were not very different, and we see the results... and there was a period of growth in Latin America, there was the period of... basically... import substitution industrialization... but that ended with this neo-liberal shift in the 1980s, and now it's beginning to resume.

It, it... took place under very ugly conditions, like, in Brazil, there was economic growth, but under kind of like... neo-Nazi, military dictatorship... substantially... very strongly supported by the US, even its imposition. But there was growth... and the same throughout the hemisphere. It changed very shortly in the 80s, with the imposition of what's called sound economics, and now there's a kind of liberation from that. And maybe these internal problems can be seriously faced. They're very striking. You see, every country, so take let's say Bolivia, what happened in Bolivia is quite remarkable, the most repressed part of the population in the continent – indigenous population – actually took over.

That's pretty remarkable. But there's a quick, an immediate backlash from the eastern area, where the... most of the resources happen to be in, which is under the control of the traditional Europeanized, partially white elite, and they want to... actually they want to succeed, but they certainly want at least autonomy, they want to block the indigenous-based development model, and it became pretty brutal, and then there were dozens of peasants killed and so on, looked like a civil war might break out. At that point there was an intervention by UNSAUR, which Brazil led in many ways, which was pretty successful, it prevented it and restored governmental authority. These things don't end, but there are moves in a positive direction, and all of that is enormously significant, I mean the US, at this point, doesn't even try to control Latin America, as you could see at Cartagena.

It may be excluded from the hemisphere, which is a really dramatic change. It's a... actually things like that have been happening for a long time... the US domination of the world, which was overwhelming in the 1940s, has been declining ever since. It started declining in the 1940s, in fact, with China moving towards independence but... it's been continuing since... it's still overwhelming, but nothing like it was, and the... what's called the "loss of Latin America", meaning the move towards independence in Latin America, is a real significant part of it – not just for Latin Americans, for the whole world system – and Brazil was, to get back to your point, Brazil's efforts to assume a more significant role in the international system are part of this. So far they haven't really succeeded very much, but there are steps, I think, in a good direction. Examples include: what you described, like the Turkish agreement with Iran, which was abortive, but a very a positive move. Others were... it's happening all the time... and so for example in the Libya... attack on Libya, which was really just the three imperial powers, traditional imperial powers, France, England and the United States... there was overwhelming opposition in the world, in favor of at least an effort to undertake diplomacy and negotiations, to try to head

off a humanitarian crisis, which in fact took place, and Brazil was a leading part of it... the BRICs countries, with Brazil playing a major role, were opposed, South Africa was opposed, Turkey was opposed, and similar in the case of Iran, which is a major issue that could break out into a horrible war... and once again, the United States and Europe are pretty isolated, if you look at world opinion, it isn't... it's almost never reported, but if you actually look at how the world lines up on this issue, the United States and its European Allies are on one side, on the other side is virtually the rest of the world.

China and Russia complain they aren't part of it, India flatly rejects it, in fact it's increasing its development trade relations with Iran, Turkey is increasing its commercial relations... The Arab world is extremely interesting, and what's reported is that the Arabs support the United States on Iran, but that's a reference to the Arab dictators. The... sort of contempt for democracy among intellectual elites – we're back to ideology again – the contempt for democracy is so profound that if the dictators support us that means the Arab support us, but what about public opinion? Well, if you have real contempt for democracy, you don't care... but we know a lot about Arab public opinion, it's studied regularly by the leading western polling agencies, indigenous ones as well, and they come out with essentially the same results... the Arab world doesn't like Iran, there are old conflicts that go back to Persian- Arab conflicts way back... they don't like Iran, but they don't regard Iran as a threat, a few percent regard Iran as a threat. They regard the United States as a threat. And in fact opposition... and Israel – which they regard as kind of like an appendage to the United States – ... and in fact opposition to US policy is so strong, that a majority – and in some countries like Egypt a considerable majority – think that the region would be better off if Iran had nuclear weapons.

The isolation of the traditional imperial powers is quite extreme... you would not guess this from reading either the media or even the professional literature. Professional, say Foreign Policy and Political Science literature, it's not the impression they give... But it's a fact. With Libya it was similar, and Brazil has a significant role in this... Could have a more significant role. Let's take, say, the Israel-Palestine conflict... it's never discussed in the west, but the fact is that there is an... there has been for decades... an international consensus on the solution, not a solution... at least a settlement, a short-term settlement, two-state settlement... it's been blocked by the United States, and cannot get anywhere, because the US and Israel impose crucial pre-conditions on negotiations. Now, that's not what's said, because the ideology is the United States is a neutral, arbiter and full of good will and so on, that's a kind of dogma, so you can't discuss it... But the fact of the matter is the US rejection has been blocking the settlement.

The pre-condition for negotiation is the US must run them. Well, that makes about as much sense as saying that let's say Shiite – Sunni conflicts in Iraq should be mediated by Iran... if anybody said that you'd laugh, and well, this is quite similar. That pre-condition guarantees that nothing will happen. If there was a serious negotiating process, it would be managed by some neutral party that has some international credibility, and there's no better choice than Brazil. It has a lot of international credibility, it's kind of a neutral party, but you can't... to even mention that in the west would elicit total incomprehension, you know... another sign of the depth of imperial ideology, you just can't conceive that anything can happen unless the traditional imperial powers run it, which makes it neutral, you know. Well, these ideological commitments are very profound, and they are pervasive you find them everywhere... But Brazil could help lead the way in breaking that down, I think it is already doing so, even if early attempts have been abortive.

**Afterword**

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Many questions were left behind because of the short time and I decided to choose one of them, which allowed a quick answer, to ask him by e-mail. The question was “In your extensive career as a public intellectual, have you ever reconsidered your opinions on any particular political issue? If so, which ones, and what made you reconsider?” The following day I received his answer: “Often. To pick an early example, in speaking about the Vietnam war in the early ‘60s I criticized the US decision to intervene in a civil war. The veteran non-violent peace activist Barbara Deming pointed out to me that was actually a US invasion of South Vietnam, and since then I’ve kept to that accurate designation.”

**Quote this interview**

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**Note**

1. Chomsky NT paraphrases here Richard Olney, who occupied the Attorney General to the Secretary of State during the Grover Cleveland administration, besides other public offices and the position of Ambassador. The passage alluded by Chomsky, delivered when Olney was Secretary of State, referred to a border dispute between Venezuela and England, which became known as the Olney interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, extending to the rest of the American continent the rejection of European interference. In full: “Today the United States is sovereign on this continent Practically and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition .... its infinite resources combined with its isolated position render it master of the situation and the Practically invulnerable against any or all other powers.”