

Free and fair trade

Noam Chomsky sets out his vision of fair globalization in conversation with Global Agenda's **Maria Ahmed**

For the record, I am in favour of globalization. That has been true of the left and the labour movement since their modern origins. That's why every union is called an international; why there were several abortive attempts to form internationals; and why I've always taken for granted, and repeatedly written, that the global justice movements of the past few years, meeting annually in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, and elsewhere (and now having spawned many regional social forums) are perhaps the seeds of a real international. That is, globalization that prioritizes the rights of people – real people of flesh and blood.

Indeed, the most enthusiastic proponents of globalization are those who meet at the World Social Forum and related events, such as the Via Campesina meetings.

I don't know of anyone opposed to globalization – that is, international integration, economic and otherwise – except, perhaps, for some dedicated hermits.

So, at some level, workers and companies agree: everyone favours globalization, in the technical sense of the word, not the doctrinal sense that has been appropriated by advocates of the investor-rights style of integration that is built into the so-called “free trade agreements”, with their complex mixture of liberalization, protectionism, and the undermining of popular democratic control over policy.

The question is what form globalization should take. No one has the right to appropriate the term for their own particular choice on this matter.

Globalization that does not prioritize the rights of people will very likely degenerate into a form of

tyranny, perhaps oligarchic and oligopolistic, based on concentrations of tightly-linked state-private power, largely unaccountable to the public.

Free movement of goods, capital, people

I don't understand how people can talk about “free trade” with a straight face. Apart from the transparent violations of free trade built into the World Trade Organization rules – monopolistic pricing guarantees that go far beyond anything to be found in economic history, for example – what does it mean for political entities that rely crucially on the dynamic state sector for economic development (such as the US) to enter into “free trade agreements”?

There is so much deception in the way the issues are formulated that it's impossible to proceed without unravelling an intricate web of doctrinal mythology.

I agree with the 18th-century economic philosopher Adam Smith that free movement of people is a core component of free trade. As for free movement of capital, that's a totally different matter. Unlike persons of flesh and blood, capital has no rights, at least by Enlightenment/classical liberal

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standards. As soon as we bring up the matter of free movement of capital, we have to face the fact that although in principle people are at least equal in rights, in a just society, talk of capital conceals the reality: we are speaking of owners of capital, who are vastly unequal in power, naturally.

In the real world, free movement of capital entails radical restriction of democracy, for obvious reasons that have long been well understood. Speaking of capital and labour as if they were on a par is so hopelessly misleading that sensible discussion is impossible in these terms.

Globalization that is just

To proceed with what just globalization should be, we first have to settle questions about democratic versus authoritarian control of production, distribution, interchange, information, and so on. All are prerequisites for sensible discussion of interaction across borders – assuming that there even should be borders in a decent world. (I think not, but that's another large topic.) Too many important questions are begged when we ask about a just form of globalization.

The same holds, though much more marginally, for foreign

investment in countries that lack the benefits of a prolonged popular struggle for basic rights, including workplace rights. Wal-Mart, US corporations that import from their facilities abroad and working people all have an interest in cheap goods – up to a point; there are obvious difficulties for the workforce. And there are many other cases.

China's economic might is a complicated matter. For one thing, a great deal of the country's productive capacity is foreign-owned, increasingly so towards the high-tech end. For another, there are very sharp and growing divides within China. Such crucial questions aside, the social justice movements should, and typically do, strongly support economic growth in China, or anywhere, in the same sense that they do here: not if it means crushing working people and leaving poor peasants to rot, or it contributes to the destruction of an environment in which our grandchildren might have a decent life. **GA**



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Noam Chomsky has been on the staff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology since 1955, and has been an Institute Professor in linguistics since 1976. He has written more than 70 books on politics and linguistics. His next book, *Failed States*, will be published later this year.

Globalization that does not prioritize the rights of people will very likely degenerate into a form of tyranny