Interview - Noam Chomsky

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUN 19 2016

Noam Chomsky is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Seen by many as "the father of modern linguistics", his work as a theoretical linguist from the 1950s revolutionized the field of linguistics by treating language as a uniquely human, biologically based cognitive capacity. Through his contributions to linguistics and related fields, including cognitive psychology and the philosophies of mind and language, Chomsky helped to initiate and sustain what came to be known as the "cognitive revolution." Chomsky has also gained a worldwide following as a political dissident for his analyses of the pernicious influence of economic elites on U.S. domestic politics, foreign policy, and intellectual culture. The author of more than 120 books, Chomsky is widely recognized as a paradigm shifter who helped spark a major revolution in the human sciences, and is one of the most cited scholars in the last few decades. His most recent documentary, *Requiem for the American Dream,* focuses on the defining characteristic of our time—the deliberate concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a select few.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

For better or worse, I've pretty much stayed the same throughout my life. When I was a child in elementary school I was writing articles for the school newspaper on the rise of fascism in Europe and the threats to the world as I saw them from a 10-year-old point of view, and on from there. By the time I was a young teenager, I was very involved in radical politics of all kinds; hanging around anarchist bookstores and offices. A lot concerned what was happening during the Second World War: the British attack on Greece and the atomic bomb I thought was shattering.

The things I consider inspiring is seeing people struggling: poor suffering people, with limited resources, struggling to really achieve anything. Some of them are very inspiring. For example, a remote very poor village in southern Colombia organising to try to prevent a Canadian gold-mining operation from destroying their water supply and the environment; meanwhile, fending off para-military and military violence and so on. That kind of thing which you see all over the world is very inspiring.

In your new documentary *Requiem for the American Dream*, you note that the driving down of tax rates and the outsourcing of lower-skilled jobs has exacerbated inequality in recent years. Both of these phenomena are arguably due to the pressures of globalisation, and so, is this period of rapid globalisation generally bad for workers?

They could be described as globalisation but it would be a mistake to do so. Globalisation can take all kinds of forms. For example, if there were anybody that believed in free markets they might take Adam Smith seriously. Adam Smith pointed out that the fundamental element of free markets is the free circulation of labour. We don't have that. We have sharp restrictions on the movement of labour, and so, it not only means that working people can't come to the United States to work, it means that privileged professionals, such as lawyers or CEOs, can set up protectionist barriers to prevent competition from abroad. Plenty of lawyers and doctors from abroad who are highly skilled could easily meet U.S. professional standards but of course they aren't allowed in because professionals can protect themselves.

Globalisation could be designed so that it's beneficial to the general population or it could be designed so that it

functions along the lines of the international trade agreements, including the Uruguay Round, the WTO Agreement, NAFTA, the current Atlantic and Pacific agreements, which are all specifically designed as investor rights agreements, not even trade agreements. Very high protection for major corporations, for big pharmaceuticals, media conglomerates, and so on, and very high barriers through intellectual property rights. Devices that allow corporations, but of course not people, to sue governments action that might potentially harm their profits. That is a particular form of globalisation designed in the interest of the designers. The designers are concentrations of private power, linked closely to state power, so in that system they are consequences of globalisation.

You refer to the impact of the GI Bill of Rights and how in 1950, higher education was largely free and was seen much more as a public good. The period during the 1980s threatened the foundations of these integral institutions that had been established through the New Deal. How and why did these institutions come under attack?

The 1950-1960s had very high growth rates, no financial crises because of New Deal regulations that were still in place, and relatively egalitarian growth so every quintile grew roughly at the same level. That is what is called the golden age. It ended with the collapse of the post-War Bretton Woods system when the United States under Nixon blocked the convertibility of the dollar to gold which collapsed the international financial system which had all kinds of consequences. One was a rapid increase in the flow of capital and a rapid increase in speculation rather than serious investment leading to the financialisation of the economy which has been a major phenomenon in recent years. A lot of this had to do with the reduction of the rate of profit for manufacturing which convinced the owners of capital that it would be more profitable to shift towards financial manipulation than to actual production.

Along with this comes the options that were the extensions of a long process that goes way back to try to move production to places where wages are much lower, where you don't need to worry about environmental standards. It's not that business began to try to reverse the policies. They also wanted to reverse the policies as it goes back to the late 1930s. By the late 1930s, the business community was appalled at the gains that were being made by working people and the general population. You read the Business Press in the late '30s and it talks about the threat of what they call the rising political power of the masses which is going to threaten the needs of American enterprise.

Businesses are always involved in a class war; sometimes they can do better and sometimes they can do worse but right after the Second World War, the major attack on labour and New Deal measures begun and took awhile to take off but with the breakdown of the international financial system in the early '70s, opportunities arose and class warfare increased. You can see that already in the late Carter years and it took off very strongly during the Reagan/Thatcher period where neoliberal policies were instituted and which had a devastating effect on the weaker societies, including the third world. In the richer societies, the United States and Europe, it has the effect of imposing relative stagnation on the large majority of the population while for a tiny sector a huge increase in wealth, but these are just all aspects of a constant class war that is being carried out. If there's no reaction to it on the part of public organisations, then the class war succeeds.

Popular public organisations have been under attack and atomised, and the labour movement has been under severe attack. One aspect of the concentration of private wealth is that it sets off a vicious cycle; private wealth concentrates and it carries with it political power. That political power is used to introduce legislation which increase private wealth and so the cycle goes on. It's not a law of nature, or a law of economics; these are matters of relative power of various classes of people and the ongoing conflicts over the social and political nature of the system. It right now happens to be a period of regression from the general viewpoint of the population. It's happened before and it's been overcome. You see it happening in many ways. One aspect is the decline of democracy which is very visible both in the United States and in Europe and has led to the significant decline of the more-or-less centrist parties. In the United States, the Democrats and the Republicans are both under severe attack from popular-based forces, such as Trump and Sanders. People that have very much the same interests and concerns and if they could get together on those issues it would be a major popular force and in Europe you see the same thing. Recently, in the Austrian elections, the two traditional parties that ran the country were out of the elections. The choice was between a neo-fascist party and a green party.

You reference Martin Gilens' study that finds that around 70% cannot affect government policy in any form. How has this alienation among the powerless translated in the discourse seen during the 2016 election primaries?

Very directly. That's part of the basis of the support for Trump and Sanders. In some respects, they're pretty similar reactions. There's a close correlation between effective disenfranchisement and simply abstention which has been studied for years. Walter Dean Burnham years ago did a study of the socio-economic character of non-voters in the United States and what he found is that they're pretty similar to the people in Europe who voted for Social Democratic and Labour-based parties. Since they don't exist in the United States, they just didn't vote. It's been around for a long time, but it's just getting exacerbated as large sectors of the population are just cast by the wayside in the course of neoliberal programs. Either they would organise, be effective and do something about it, such as the 1930s with the militant labour movement or just get angry or frustrated, xenophobic, racist, destructive and so on.

Inequality in all its forms continues to threaten democracy in the United States. Do you see evidence that positive change to reverse these trends will arise, and is there a case for optimism?

We can be very optimistic. Things like this have happened before and they've been overcome. The 1920s were a period kind of like this in many ways, but the 1930s were a significant revival, things changed and there are forces you can easily identify. A lot of the support for Sanders is promising and could have a lot of promise but it depends how it is developed; the same with Corbyn in England and Podemos in Spain. There are reactions to problems that are not easy to overcome, but I think there are plenty of possibilities.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR.