

On human rights and ideology

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Noam Chomsky interviewed by Jeff Sellars.

QUESTION: The past decade has witnessed a trend toward what some observers described as "neo-conservatism" among some self-proclaimed former members of the liberal intelligentsia. How do you analyze this trend?

CHOMSKY: You're thinking of people like Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan and so on. Well, I think these people were very much frightened by the mass politics of the 1960s, which for a time really threatened to engage substantial parts of the population in the democratic process and to threaten elite domination. And, of course, as in the case of any mass popular movement, there were aspects of it that were ugly and unpleasant. But that's not what bothered them. What bothered them was particularly the democratic aspect of it, the fact that previously repressed and quiet and apathetic groups were finding a voice and searching for and sometimes finding ways to struggle for their rights. I think that there's been a general tendency, not only among the neo-conservatives but among others, to try to find an approach to contemporary society which would eliminate these democratic strivings.

QUESTION: As an intellectual yourself, how do you see your role in relation to the state?

CHOMSKY: By and large, it is not a point of principle, but I would see myself as quite antagonistic to any form of concentrated power. Concentrated agglomerations of power, whether state or private -- and in our society that's hardly a distinction -- will tend to use their power for their own perceived benefit and quite often for the harm of others. And since I'm against the existence of such concentrations of power, I also tend to be opposed to the actions they carry out in the exercise of their power. So I would say that my general position would be adversarial. As far as mass popular movements are concerned, if they existed, I would like to do something that could be of service to them.

QUESTION: Does the Carter Administration concern for human rights indicate some sort of shift in American foreign policy?

CHOMSKY: You're begging the question there. I don't agree that the Carter Administration has any concern for human rights. I think it has a human rights rhetoric that is perfectly consistent with supplying armaments for some of the world. On the other hand, it was, from a propaganda point of view, very effective to suddenly raise the human rights banner in 1976, at a period when there had been a great deal of revulsion over the obvious American role in repressing human rights throughout the world.

What's interesting to me is that that public relations exercise can succeed. And it certainly has succeeded. That is, there are people who will say that the Carter Administration's policy is inconsistent or indefinite or this or that, but in general it is assumed that there is a human rights policy. Now, as far as I know, no great power in the world, in history, has ever followed a "human rights policy" -- certainly not this Administration.

QUESTION: Should a power follow a human rights policy?

CHOMSKY: I don't think that any power ever will. I think that the only way in which more humane policies can be imposed on the great powers is by mass popular movements of their citizens. So, for example, the peace movement was one of the factors that forced the United States to restrain what would otherwise have been a much more intensive assault against Vietnam. The civil rights movement caused American power to make moves that ameliorated the situation of oppressed minorities. That's the way to press power towards human rights concerns. There's no other way.

QUESTION: How do you explain reports that the Administration's "human rights policy" has at least appeared to achieve some progress toward democracy through promoting free elections in several Latin American countries?

CHOMSKY: Well, first of all, some of the side effects of the human rights rhetoric have in fact been beneficial. In some cases, for example, the Dominican Republic, the Carter Administration did apply pressures which allowed a conservative land-owner, a businessman, to be elected in place of the fascist dictator who we had installed years earlier. And, in fact, the United States would generally prefer what looks like a liberal democratic government; that would be preferable to having, let's say, a murderer or a torturer. The trouble is that to achieve the kinds of aims to which American policy is directed, for example to improve the investment climate, it is repeatedly necessary to introduce doses of terrorism and repression. So, of course, we'd much prefer to have a democratic facade, but it's very hard to maintain that.

QUESTION: What about the point that the United States has to curry the favor of Third World countries by aiding their military and police if it wants to maintain its influence with them?

CHOMSKY: If the United States wants to maintain a favorable climate for investment and exploitation, it will have to impose a leadership, or back a leadership, which supports those aims. If we allowed independent development to take place in countries, and in fact supported such independent development, it would harm precisely those interests that dominate American foreign policy: business interests. So we're not going to do it.

QUESTION: What do you think of the argument that some repression is necessary to raise standards of living in the Third World?

CHOMSKY: Well, I think we can say the following: that a lot of repression is necessary to raise the standards of living for the elites in the Third World. And the historical

evidence seems to be conclusive on that score. The actual argument that's put forth is that, in the short run, you have to have repression and lowering standards of living in order that, in the long run, there can be growth. And the argument, which is a very weak argument, I think, is that that's the way it worked in the industrial West. If you look at the industrialization of the West, it did involve enormous brutality. Even in England, the most privileged country in resources, it did involve quite possibly an actual lowering of the standards of living for a very large part of the population, over a long period, maybe fifty or a hundred years. Now, a couple of questions arise: for one thing, is it necessary for development to have that enormous human cost? The other question is: in the Third World countries, which are by no means as privileged as England and the United States were hundreds of years ago, will that model ever work? What reason is there to believe that they can duplicate our experience? In fact, there are very strong reasons why they can't. They're industrializing in a totally different world and facing much more onerous conditions.

QUESTION: Do you think development in the Third World is possible under an autarchic model which stresses independence of the economy from Western influence?

CHOMSKY: I wouldn't want to try that for certain. I don't think one can make rash statements about that. It's certainly a possible model of development, and it might very well turn out that that's the right one. However, what I'm saying is that there will be no possibility of exploring this model because the outside pressures against it will be so harsh unless we change the behavior of the industrial countries.

QUESTION: Is that possible?

CHOMSKY: Yes, I think it's possible. Again, just as in the case of the peace movement, by developing forces within the industrial democracies that will assist meaningful development. This happens in small countries. For example, take Sweden. Now, Sweden has in fact a very constructive program supporting Third World development. Of course, one can argue that it's much easier in Sweden than in the United States because Sweden is only marginal in the mansion of capitalism and that, no matter what happens there, if it doesn't happen in the United States it doesn't make a great deal of difference. So while those Third World countries integrated into the capitalist system wouldn't care that much about Sweden, they would care about the United States. Of course, the opposite side of that argument is that we all care about what happens in the United States. These are human institutions. We can affect them. They're not laws of nature we're talking about.

QUESTION: One major focus of your book is the role of the American press, *The New York Times*, the wire services, and so on, in filtering the information that reaches the American public about repressive regimes. Several times you compare the the information reaching Americans with that reaching the Soviet people through a system of strict state censorship. With an uncensored media in the United States, how is this possible?

CHOMSKY: Well, first of all, notice that we don't say, and it wouldn't be correct to say, that the devices are the same, or even that the impact is quite the same. The American system, however, does have the same effect in many cases as the system of state censorship. It is more diverse, and far wealthier, and operates by entirely different mechanisms. The way it works here is far more subtle: it works by a system of shared interests. The media are major corporations, and they share the ideological commitments of the core capitalist elite that controls most of the economy and most of the state as well. And, in fact, if they ever began to deviate from these commitments, they would probably go out of business. Furthermore, for individuals to work their way up into the media system, with rare exceptions, they must share these professional interests or they are not going to make it in this system of indoctrination. And the sort of backing for this is that the intelligentsia as a whole tend to share the doctrines of the state religion so that the pool of people you have to select from is already pre-selected. They would never have worked through the educational system and made it into positions of academic power or professional power if they hadn't worked pretty much within the framework of these assumptions. Now, always there are a few exceptions. But this whole system of conformity is so overwhelming that, simply allowing that it operates by its own dynamism, there's going to be a very narrow spectrum of opinion expressed, and also a very narrow interpretation of current history which will conform to that of the state propaganda system.

QUESTION: Could you give an example of this self-censorship by the media?

CHOMSKY: Well, maybe the most dramatic example is the case of the U.S.-backed Indonesian invasion of East Timor, which has probably led to the massacre of several hundred thousand people in the past three years. The Indonesian army is 90 percent armed by the United States and there is a continual flow of arms to make sure that the massacre continues. Right now, the part of the population that's alive is mostly starving to death under conditions that American aid officials privately say are quite comparable to what exists in Cambodia. And the media refuse to publish a word about this. A few of them have published what is for the most part Indonesian government propaganda but the majority of them haven't said anything at all. Now, in this case, the American media are behaving precisely in the manner of a totalitarian state-controlled press. But they're doing it for their own interests.

QUESTION: You have acknowledged that some information about American-backed fascist regimes does get through the media's system of self-censorship. What role does this information play in the formation of American opinion?

CHOMSKY: Well, the effect on American opinion is very slight. But for individuals like me, say, the difference is fantastic. For example, living in a so-called totalitarian state, I couldn't begin to do the things I do here. Even if for some reason I wasn't put in jail, it would be too hard to get information. But for individuals who want to act politically and to sort of work their way through the system of indoctrination, it's incomparably easier in a democratic system of state control than in a totalitarian one. On the other hand, this is almost politically meaningless because for the mass of the population it has no

consequences. They can't take the time or the effort to devote to the fanaticism that's required to find out the truth about these matters.

QUESTION: As American citizens, what can we do about our support of repression and state terrorism in the Third World?

CHOMSKY: Well, I think we know the answer to that. There's a short range answer and a long range answer. The short range answer is to try to develop popular movements like the peace movement of the 1960s, which happened completely within the framework of American institutions as a challenge from below but nevertheless impeded the terrorism of the American state, and did so significantly. The long range answer is to change those institutions significantly enough so that they won't use this built-in tendency to support repressions and immiseration in the Third World.

QUESTION: Do we have any special leverage as members of the university community?

CHOMSKY: As members of the university community, we are highly privileged. We're privileged economically, we're privileged in our class background, we're privileged in the freedom that we have, we're privileged in the facilities that we have available. So there are all sorts of possibilities that university people have to act -- students, faculty, maybe staff -- I think, in a way which will be humane and effective, that less privileged people don't have. Consequently, when we don't use these possibilities, there is just no gain from them.