

A Complex World: My Interview With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky has revolutionized multiple fields of study from psychology to linguistics to political science. Chomsky changed the way human beings even think about language through such concepts as the universal grammar theory. In the field of psychology, Chomsky was instrumental in debunking Skinner's theory of behaviorism. In the field of political science, with books such as *Manufacturing Consent* to *Fateful Triangle* to *Hegemony or Survival*, and many others, Chomsky enlightened people all over the world, from individual citizens to revolutionary political leaders. It is for these reasons, and more, why it is no surprise that Chomsky is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of our time.

Shortly after the 2016 U.S. elections, I had the privilege of being able to sit down with Professor Chomsky at his office for a chat on an array of different topics, such as what is the fate of an honest intellectual, the concept of pre-modern societies, ethnic conflict, the religious nation-state, federalism, the political vulgarization of genocide, what is power, the value of truth and reconciliation commissions, and anarchism.

What is the Fate of An Honest Intellectual?

Noam Chomsky There's a history, goes back 2500 years, back to the origins of recorded history, classical Greece, and the biblical records. Go back to Greece; there was a man [Socrates] who was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens by asking searching questions. His fate was to be killed with poison—given the hemlock. In the biblical record, which is partly accurate, partly not, there were critical intellectuals—the word that is used for them is prophets. That is a dubious translation of an obscure Hebrew phrase. What they were, if you look at what they were actually saying, were critics. They criticized the acts of the evil kings, they gave geopolitical analysis, warned that the policies were going to lead to disaster; they called for helping widows and orphans and so on. That is what

today we call dissident intellectuals. What happened to them? They were imprisoned, driven into the desert, maligned; the worst of the Kings, King Ahab, condemned the Prophet Elijah as a hater of Israel because he was condemning the acts of the evil Kings—it is probably the origin of the notion of anti-American and anti-Israel, and so on. And it goes the same way throughout history.

Going up to modern times, the term intellectual, in the current sense, is really not used before the late 19th century. It came into use at the time of the Dreyfus trial in France, and Emile Zola and others who supported Dreyfus and condemned the state and the military. They were critical intellectuals [who] were bitterly condemned by the mainstream of the intellectual classes. Zola himself had to flee France for his life. That is the treatment of dissidents.

Shortly after that came the First World War, which was very striking, a lot of commentary on it now since it is the centenary. One of the most interesting things is the reaction of intellectuals. On every side, the intellectual classes lined up passionately in support of their own state. In Germany, there was a manifesto of 93 leading intellectuals instructing the civilized world that Germany is defending the great cultural legacy of Beethoven, Immanuel Kant, and so on, and the world should join them—on the Western side, the same. There were critics, [such as] Bertrand Russell in England, Rosa Luxembourgh, Karl Liebknecht in Germany, Eugene Debs in the United States; they were put in jail. That is intellectuals.

What is the price that you have personally paid as an intellectual for criticizing the actions of your own community?

The United States is a pretty free society these days—and people with a degree of privilege are not subject to—it is not like Turkey today where you are thrown in jail if you say something the President doesn't like—so it is vilification, marginalization, denunciation. Actually, there were penalties, but they were self-induced. I was involved extensively in civil disobedience, resistance, came pretty close to a long jail sentence, but I can't call that repression—it was things I was doing consciously.

I know people like Norman Finkelstein, he faced certain consequences; he was not able to get tenure at his university.

It is a special case. It is a very rotten one, but it is a special case. Norman

Finkelstein exposed the dishonest criminality of a Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, who went berserk, and tried in any way he could think of to destroy Finkelstein to the point of—I can go through the details—but it was Dershowitz's jihad to try to protect himself. He knew that he could not answer Finkelstein's criticisms. So the way he picked was to try vilification, denunciation, massive efforts to prevent him from getting tenure, and yes, so that happened. It is a rotten case, but it is a special case.

Pre-Modern Society

Pre-modern society—pre-modern means not having assimilated and accepted the basic values of the enlightenment and since—and that's a large part of the Western world. Take the United States, leader of the free world, most powerful state in human history, supposedly a beacon of freedom and enlightenment. Take, say, global warming, one of the major problems humans have ever faced, it is hard to convince people in the United States it is a real problem. The reason—40 percent of the population thinks it can't be a problem because Jesus is coming in a few decades. Is that pre-modern? Yeah, it is pre-modern. It is a culturally conservative society—pre-modern in many respects.

Take Europe—Austria and Germany—two countries which evoke some memories from the 1930s. In Austria, a neo-Nazi party is likely to take the Presidency. In Germany, ultra-right nationalist party with neofascist tendencies is defeating the mainstream Merkel party in local elections. Is that pre-modern? Was Nazism pre-modern? Depends what you mean by modern. If you mean by that not having assimilated the fundamental values that were brought forth during the enlightenment and since, yes, much of the world is pre-modern.

In fact, take a phenomenon that is taking place right at this moment. There is a conference in Morocco, as you know, the COP22 conference. It is an international effort to put some teeth in the global warming agreements. What is happening at COP22 is that the values and hopes of civilization are being upheld by China—a harsh authoritarian state is in the lead in trying to mobilize support to deal with this massive problem. The United States, the leader of the free world, is at the end of the line trying to draw the train backwards. It is an astonishing phenomenon, and it is not commented on.

Ethnic Conflict

Until not so long ago, liberal, socialists, and Marxist theoreticians assumed that conflicts involving ethnicity were a phenomenon of pre-modern society and that such conflicts would progressively fade away. Why haven't we as a society been able to overcome the futility of engaging in ethnic conflict—the uselessness. Why haven't we been able to overcome that?

To some extent, we have. Not totally. There has been progress. Take Europe; for centuries, Europe was the most savage place in the world. The Europeans were just slaughtering one another. The Thirty Years War of the 17th century, maybe a third of the population in Germany was wiped out. There was another 30 years war in the 20th century—from 1914 to 1945—a total horror story. I don't have to tell you what happened in Europe, the rest of the world. Since 1945, there have not been any major wars in Europe. Is that because we are more civilized? No. It is because it was understood that the next time you have a war, you are finished. Humans have created the capacity to destroy themselves and everything else, and we have come very close to blowing everything up. There have been many cases where terminal nuclear war was extremely close and the threat is in fact increasing now.

Religious-Nation State

Why is it dangerous to recognize a country as a Muslim state or a Buddhist state or a Jewish state or a Christian state? Why is that—why is that dangerous?

It depends what your values are. If you believe in democracy, states are states of their citizens—not of some privilege sector of the citizens. So if the United States were called a “white state” that would be outrageous, similarly, if it were called a Christian state and similarly if Pakistan is called an Islamic state or if Israel is called a Jewish state. That is saying that our society recognizes two categories of citizens, “the privileged categories” and the “others”, and that violates the most elementary principles of democratic freedom. I should say if these designations are just symbolic, maybe it does not matter. So, for example, with the United States if the official day of rest is Sunday instead of Thursday, okay, it is not a big deal. It is symbolic.

Federalism

With rebel conflicts and separatist conflicts being waged in various parts of the

globe, what role do you believe federalism can play in de-stabilizing these conflicts?

Well, take, say, Europe again. One of the greatest achievements of post-war Europe—now under threat incidentally—is a slow move towards a kind of federalism. The Schengen agreement, which permits free passage among the countries of Europe, is a step towards a more tolerant and civilized society; it is a kind of federalism. It has positive and negative aspects because of the way it is implemented. Because of the way it was integrated into the Eurozone—which is something separate from the EU—it has led to a situation where sovereignty has passed from populations to the bureaucracy in Brussels with the German banks hanging over their shoulders. That is where basic decisions are made. It does not matter who people elect for their own government, the major decisions are out of their hands. That has led to extreme resentment—justified resentment—taking self-destructive paths, but the resentment is understandable. That is part of the background for the rise of the ultra-right parties which appeal to the population on the grounds that they no longer control their own destiny. If [Marine] Le Pen wins in France, as she might, she might very well implement what they call “Frexit”—a referendum to pull France out of the European Union, which might destroy it. Now we are back to Europe of competing nationalities, which [has] a pretty ugly past.

Political Vulgarization of Genocide

How has the concept of genocide become, as you state, politically vulgarized and why is it dangerous to politicize the concept of genocide?

Well, genocide had a meaning in the early stages. I mean, it is not a matter of the definition but the way it was understood. Genocide meant what the Nazis did to the Jews, for example. That was genocide. By now the term is used so broadly that people even talk about committing genocide against five people, or a massacre somewhere with a couple hundred people is called genocide. And in fact, it is used in a very restrictive way. We use the term genocide to refer to the atrocities committed by someone else, not our own. Let us take a real case—the Clinton and Blair sanctions on Iraq—that actually was called genocide by the distinguished international diplomats who administered the oil for food program, the so-called “humanitarian” aspect of the sanctions. Denis Halliday, who resigned in protest, because he said they are genocidal, and Hans von Sponeck, who followed him,

resigned on the grounds that the [sanctions] amounted to genocide. Hans von Sponeck, in fact, published a detailed book about it called *A Different Kind of War*. They did condemn the sanctions as genocidal. What was the result? Try to find a copy of von Sponeck's book. Try to find a reference to it. Try to find a review. Try to find anything. This is wiped out of western commentary. The last time I looked, there was not a single review in the United States. The only review in England I think was in the communist party newspaper.

So what needs to be done to reverse the political vulgarization of the concept of the genocide, can it still be used?

It can be used if we are willing to become civilized to recognize that crimes are crimes whether they commit them or we commit them. We could, for example, listen to Justice Robert Jackson—the Chief Prosecutor of Nuremberg—his injunction to the tribunal. He spoke to the tribunal and said: we have to recognize that crimes are crimes whether they commit them or we commit them. We are handing these defendants, he said, a poisoned chalice, and if we sip from it, we must be subject to the same conditions. If not, the whole trial is a farce. Is that applied on and when Britain and the United States invaded Iraq? It is a textbook example of aggression with absolutely no justification, textbook example of what the Nuremberg tribunal called the “supreme international crime” which differs from other war crimes in that it includes all of the evil that follows. For example, the rise of ISIS, and the death of millions of people, includes all of that. Can you find any commentary in the United States even calling [the US-UK invasion] a crime?

Obama is greatly admired on the left because he said it was a blunder. It is just like German generals after Stalingrad who said that the two front war was a blunder—which it was—we should have knocked out England first. That is as far as you can go. The head of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, when this was specifically brought to his attention can only go as far as saying that [Iraq] was a mistake. Was it a mistake when the Nazis committed aggression? Was it a mistake when Russians invaded Afghanistan? If you are a loyal communist, it was a mistake. We do not call it that. We cannot rise to the level of civilization—even the head of Human Rights Watch, in the leading left liberal journal of intellectuals in the West, the New York Review, [and] Obama, any of them can't say that we committed a crime. At most, we made mistakes.

Go back to Justice Jackson. Anybody listen to his words? Then take Vietnam. The worst crime of the post-war era, worst crime, millions of people killed, three countries destroyed, people still dying from the chemical warfare that was initiated by John F. Kennedy and expanded. Is it a mistake? Is it a crime? Is anybody guilty, responsible?

Right now, the Obama administration is sponsoring a big memorial of the Vietnam War, and Obama made a, you know, passionate speech with his elevated rhetoric about what happened. He even did talk about crimes; he talked about the crimes that were committed against the American veterans who were not treated properly. What about the Vietnamese? Let's take Jimmy Carter, the human rights President, right after the war, [in] 1977 he was asked in a press conference, "do we owe any debt to Vietnam?" He said we owe them no debt because the destruction was mutual. 1977 human rights President, was there a comment? A few commented on it. I commented on it, and a couple of other people. Until we rise to a minimal level of civilization, we can't use the term genocide.

What is power?

Individuals like John Mearsheimer, Kenneth Waltz, and Joseph Nye have each defined what they consider to be "power" in international relations. You have criticized power structures and power systems. But I would like to know what you consider to be power in the field of international relations.

That is pretty straight forward. Power is the ability to issue orders which others have to follow; to the extent that you can do that, you have power. The orders do not have to be verbal. It can be actions, so if you can invade Iraq, worst crime of the 21st century, and you get no censure or no reaction for it—that is power.

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

In the aftermath of conflicts, to what extent are truth and reconciliation commissions a viable form of achieving justice and accountability?

I think they make sense in many situations. For example, take South Africa, there were horrible crimes committed under apartheid. But to try to punish people for those crimes would have torn the society to shreds and undermined any hope of progress and development, so a decision was made by the ANC—which I think is understandable—to avoid direct punishment and to settle for a truth and

reconciliation commission to expose the nature of what happened, so at least it is kind of understood. Same was done in Central America, Brazil, and East Timor. Take East Timor, which was, if the term genocide has any meaning, what Indonesia did in East Timor, with the backing of the United States, Britain, other western countries, even Sweden, that comes about as close to genocide as anything since the Second World War. East Timor, finally, won its independence. Should they carry out war crimes trials against Indonesia, Australia, United States, and others? Or should they try to mend the fences with Indonesia and maybe settle for a truth and reconciliation commission? I think the latter, which is what they are doing. They have to live in the world, right?

Let us take where we happen to be sitting right now. The native population suffered a migrant crisis of an incredible kind, not the kind that we talked about, a migrant crisis where the immigrants come in with the intention of exterminating and expelling the population. That is not what we call a crisis, but that is what happened here. There are remnants of the people that used to live here. They have a reservation in Cape Cod and naturally, should they institute war crime trials against the people who live in their homes? It would not make a lot of sense. It would make a lot of sense to bring out understanding of what happened to call for reparations and so on, but not war crimes trials. It just means nothing in these circumstances. Is it genocide? The population of this territorial United States, the time the colonists arrived, nobody knows for sure, maybe 10 million or something like that. By 1900, when there was census, there were about 200,000. The Western hemisphere had about 80 million people when Columbus arrived, and pretty soon about 90 percent of them were gone.

Anarchism

I think as an anarchist, in the long term, you believe that centralized political power ought to be eliminated and turned down to the local level, so what role (if any) would federalism play in your long term vision of anarchism?

The general anarchist pictures—at least within the tradition I associate myself with—are highly federalist, but they assume that they are based on the notion of voluntary association. So there should be self-determination in all institutional structures of life. But voluntary associations could extent to regions and countries, internationally, that is a kind of federalism supported from below. I think it makes good sense in a complex world.

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