

Noam Chomsky On The Perils Of Market-Driven Education



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Throughout most of the modern period, beginning with the era known as the Enlightenment, education was widely regarded as the most important asset for the building of a decent society. However, this value seems to have fallen out of favor in the contemporary period, perhaps as a reflection of the dominance of the neoliberal ideology, creating in the process a context where education has been increasingly reduced to the attainment of professional, specialized skills that cater to the needs of the business world.

What is the actual role of education and its link to democracy, to decent human relations and to a decent society? What defines a cultured and decent society? World-renowned linguist, social critic and activist Noam Chomsky shares his views on education and culture in this exclusive interview for Truthout.

*C. J. Polychroniou: At least since the Enlightenment, education has been seen as one of the few opportunities for humanity to lift the veil of ignorance and create a better world. What are the actual connections between democracy and education, or are those links based mainly on a myth, as Neil Postman argued in *The End of Education*?*

Noam Chomsky: I don't think there is a simple answer. The actual state of education has both positive and negative elements, in this regard. An educated public is surely a prerequisite for a functioning democracy — where “educated” means not just informed but enabled to inquire freely and productively, the primary end of education. That goal is sometimes advanced, sometimes impeded, in actual practice, and to shift the balance in the right direction is a major task — a task of unusual importance in the United States, in part because of its unique power, in part because of ways in which it differs from other developed societies.

It is important to remember that although the richest country in the world for a long time, until World War II, the US was something of a cultural backwater. If one wanted to study advanced science or math, or to become a writer and artist, one would often be attracted to Europe. That changed with World War II for obvious reasons, but only for part of the population. To take what is arguably the most important question in human history, how to deal with climate change, one impediment is that in the US, 40 percent of the population sees it as no problem because Christ will return within the next few decades — symptomatic of many other pre-modern features of the society and culture.

Much of what prevails in today's world is market-driven education, which is actually destroying public values and undermining the culture of democracy with its emphasis on competition, privatization and profit-making. As such, what model of education do you think holds the best promise for a better and peaceful world?

In the early days of the modern educational system, two models were sometimes counterposed. Education could be conceived as a vessel into which one pours water — and a very leaky vessel, as we all know. Or it could be thought of as a thread, laid out by the instructor along which students proceed in their own ways, developing their capacities to “inquire and create” — the model advocated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the founder of the modern university system.

The educational philosophies of John Dewey, Paulo Freire and other advocates of progressive and critical pedagogy can, I think, be regarded as further developments of the Humboldtian conception — which is often implemented as a matter of course in research universities, because it is so essential to advanced teaching and research, particularly in the sciences. A famous MIT physicist was known for telling his freshman courses that it doesn't matter what we cover, it matters what you discover.

The same ideas have been quite imaginatively developed down to the kindergarten level, and they are quite appropriate everywhere in the educational system, and of course not just in the sciences. I was personally lucky to have been in an experimental Deweyite school until I was 12, a highly rewarding experience, quite different from the academic high school I attended, which tended toward the water-in-a-vessel model, as do currently fashionable programs of teach-to-test. The alternative ones are the kinds of models that should be pursued if there is to be some hope that a truly educated population, in all of the dimensions of the term, can face the very critical questions that are right now on the agenda.

The market-driven education tendencies that you mention are unfortunately very real, and harmful. They should, I think, be regarded as part of the general neoliberal assault on the public. The business model seeks “efficiency,” which means imposing “flexibility of labor” and what Alan Greenspan hailed as “growing worker insecurity” when he was praising the great economy he was running (before it crashed). That translates into such measures as undermining longer-term commitments to faculty and relying on cheap and easily exploitable temporary labor (adjuncts, graduate students). The consequences are harmful to the work force, the students, research and inquiry, in fact all the goals that higher education should seek to achieve.

Sometimes such attempts to drive the higher education system toward service to the private sector takes forms that are almost comical. In the State of Wisconsin, for example, Governor Scott Walker and other reactionaries have been attempting to undermine what was once the great University of Wisconsin, changing it to an institution that will serve the needs of the business community of Wisconsin, while also cutting the budget and increasing reliance on temporary staff (“flexibility”). At one point the state government even wanted to change the traditional mission of the university, deleting the commitment to “seeking truth” — a waste of time for an institution producing people who will be useful for Wisconsin businesses. That was so outrageous that it hit the newspapers, and they had to claim it was a clerical error and withdraw it.

It is, however, illustrative of what is happening, not only in the United States but also in many other places. Commenting on these developments in the UK, Stefan Collini concluded all too plausibly that the Tory government is attempting to turn first-class universities into third-class commercial institutions. So, for example, the Classics Department at Oxford will have to prove that it can sell itself on the

market. If there is no market demand, why should people study and investigate classical Greek literature? That's the ultimate vulgarization that can result from imposing the state capitalist principles of the business classes on the whole of society.

What needs to be done in order to provide a system of free higher education in the United States and, by extension, divert funding from the military-industrial complex and the prison-industrial complex into education? Would this require a national identity crisis on the part of a historically expansionist, interventionist and racist nation?

I don't feel that the issue runs that deep. The US was no less expansionist, interventionist, racist in earlier years, but it nevertheless was in the forefront of developing mass public education. And though the motives were sometimes cynical — turning independent farmers [into] cogs in mass production industry, something they bitterly resented — nevertheless there were many positive aspects to these developments. In more recent years, higher education was virtually free. After World War II, the GI bill provided tuition and even subsidies to millions of people who would probably never have gone to college, which was highly beneficial to them and contributed to the great postwar growth period. Even private colleges had very low fees by contemporary standards. And the country then was far poorer than it is today. Elsewhere higher education is free or close to it in rich countries like Germany (the most respected country in the world according to polls) and Finland (which consistently ranks high in achievement) and much poorer countries like Mexico, which has a high-quality higher education system. Free higher education could be instituted without major economic or cultural difficulties, it seems. The same is true of a rational public health system like that of comparable countries.

During the industrial era, many working-class people throughout the capitalist world immersed themselves in the study of politics, history and political economy through a process of informal education as part of their effort to understand and change the world through the class struggle. Today, the situation looks vastly different, with much of the working-class population having embraced empty consumerism and political indifference, or, worse, often enough supporting political parties and candidates who are in fact staunch supporters of corporate and financial capitalism and advance an anti-working class agenda. How do we explain this radical shift in working-class consciousness?

The change is as clear as it is unfortunate. Quite commonly these efforts were based in unions and other working-class organizations, with participation of intellectuals in left parties — all victims of Cold War repression and propaganda and the bitter class conflict waged by the business classes against labor and popular organization, mounting particularly during the neoliberal period.

It is worth remembering the early years of the industrial revolution. The working-class culture of the time was alive and flourishing. There's a great book about the topic by Jonathan Rose, called *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class*. It's a monumental study of the reading habits of the working class of the day. He contrasts "the passionate pursuit of knowledge by proletarian autodidacts" with the "pervasive philistinism of the British aristocracy." Pretty much the same was true in the new working-class towns in the United States, like eastern Massachusetts, where an Irish blacksmith might hire a young boy to read the classics to him while he was working. Factory girls were reading the best contemporary literature of the day, what we study as classics. They condemned the industrial system for depriving them of their freedom and culture. This went on for a long time.

I am old enough to remember the atmosphere of the 1930s. A large part of my family came from the unemployed working class. Many had barely gone to school. But they participated in the high culture of the day. They would discuss the latest plays, concerts of the Budapest String Quartet, different varieties of psychoanalysis and every conceivable political movement. There was also a very lively workers' education system with which leading scientists and mathematicians were directly involved. A lot of this has been lost ... but it can be recovered and it is not lost forever.

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