

ALSO BY NOAM CHOMSKY

Detering Democracy

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UNDERSTANDING POWER

The Indispensable Chomsky

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VINTAGE

infant mortality, for example. We're at about the level of Cuba, which is a poor Third World country, in terms of health standards.⁴⁸ Those are absolute scandals—the general population of the United States ought to be better off than that of any other country in the world by just a huge margin. No other industrial power has anything like our resources. We've got an educated population, like basic literacy is relatively high. We have a comparatively uniform population: people speak English all over the place—you can't find that in too many areas of the world. We've got enormous military power. We have no enemies anywhere nearby. Very few powers in history have ever had that situation. So these are just incomparable advantages, and our economic system has not turned them to the benefit of the population here, particularly—but they're there, and they're going to stay there.

Now take Japan: Japanese corporations and investors can collect a lot of capital, but they're never going to get their own resources—they don't have their own energy resources, they don't have their own raw materials, they don't have agricultural resources. And we do: that makes a big difference. In fact, American planners back in the late 1940s were very well aware of this difference when they sort of organized the post-war world—so while they helped Japan to reindustrialize, they also insisted on controlling its energy resources: the Japanese were not allowed to develop their own petroleum, chemical industry, or to obtain their own independent access to petroleum resources. And the reason for that is explained in now-declassified U.S. internal documents: as George Kennan [State Department official and diplomat, who was one of the major planners of the post-war world, pointed out, if we control Japan's energy resources, we will have veto power over Japan—if they ever get out of line, we'll just choke off their energy supply.⁴⁹ Now, whether or not that plan would still work you don't know, because the world is changing in unpredictable ways. But for the moment, the United States is still overwhelmingly powerful in world affairs—that's why we can get away with so much.

Democracy Under Capitalism

MAN: *You mentioned that we're going to need participatory social planning to save the environment. I'm wondering, doesn't decentralization of power also somehow conflict with trying to save the environment—I mean, that can't be done without some sort of central agreement, don't you think?*

Well, first of all, *agreements* don't require centralized authority; certain kinds of agreements do. One's assumption, at least, is that decentralization of power will lead to decisions that reflect the interests of the entire population. The idea is that policies flowing from any kind of decision-making apparatus are going to tend to reflect the interests of the people involved in making the decisions—which certainly seems plausible. So if a decision is

made by some centralized authority, it is going to represent the interests of the particular group which is in power. But if power is actually rooted in large parts of the population—if people can actually participate in social planning—then they will presumably do so in terms of their own interests, and you can expect the decisions to reflect those interests. Well, the interest of the general population is to preserve human life; the interest of corporations is to make profits—those are fundamentally different interests.

MAN: *In an industrial society, though, one might argue that people need to have jobs.*

Sure, but having jobs doesn't require destroying the environment which makes life possible. I mean, if you have participatory social planning, and people are trying to work things out in terms of their own interests, they are going to want to balance opportunities to work with quality of work, with type of energy available, with conditions of personal interaction, with the need to make sure your children survive, and so on and so forth. But those are all considerations that simply don't arise for corporate executives, they just are not a part of the agenda. In fact, if the C.E.O. of General Electric started making decisions on *that* basis, he'd be thrown out of his job in three seconds, or maybe there'd be a corporate takeover or something—because those things are not a part of his job. His job is to raise profit and market share, not to make sure that the environment survives, or that his workers lead decent lives. And those goals are simply in conflict.

MAN: *Give us an example of what exactly you mean by social planning.*

Well, right now we have to make big decisions about how to produce energy, for one thing—because if we continue to produce energy by combustion, the human race isn't going to survive very much longer.⁵⁰ Alright, that decision requires social planning: it's not something that you can just decide on yourself. Like, you can decide to put a solar-energy something-or-other on your own house, but that doesn't really help. This is the kind of decision where it only works if it's done on a mass scale.

MAN: *I thought you might have been referring to population control.*

Yeah, population control is another issue where it doesn't matter if you do it, everybody has to do it. It's like traffic: I mean, you can't make driving a car survivable by driving well yourself; there has to be kind of a social contract involved, otherwise it won't work. Like, if there was no social contract involved in driving—everybody was just driving like a lethal weapon, going as fast as they can and forgetting all the traffic lights and everything else—you couldn't make that situation safe just by driving well yourself; it doesn't make much difference if you set out to drive safely if everybody else

is driving lethal-weapon, right? The trouble is, that's the way that capitalism works. The nature of the system is that it's supposed to be driven by greed; no one's supposed to be concerned for anybody else, nobody's supposed to worry about the common good—those are not things that are supposed to motivate you, that's the principle of the system. The theory is that private vices lead to public benefits—that's what they teach you in economics departments. It's all total bullshit, of course, but that's what they teach you. And as long as the system works that way, yeah, it's going to self-destruct.

What's more, capitalists have long understood this. So most government regulatory systems have in fact been strongly lobbied for by the industries themselves: industries want to be regulated, because they know that if they're not, they're going to destroy themselves in the unbridled competition.⁵¹

MAN: Then what kind of mechanism for social planning do you think would work? Obviously you're not too sanguine about our current form of government.

Well, there's nothing wrong with the *form*—I mean, there are *some* things wrong with the *form*—but what's really wrong is that the *substance* is missing. Look, as long as you have private control over the economy, it doesn't make any difference what forms you have, because they can't do anything. You could have political parties where everybody gets together and participates, and *you* make the programs, make things as participatory as you like—and it would still have only the most marginal effect on policy. And the reason is, power lies elsewhere.

So suppose all of us here convinced everybody in the country to vote for us for President, we got 98 percent of the vote and both Houses of Congress, and then we started to institute very badly needed social reforms that most of the population wants. Simply ask yourself, what would happen? Well, if your imagination doesn't tell you, take a look at real cases. There are places in the world that have a broader range of political parties than we do, like Latin American countries, for example, which in this respect are much more democratic than we are. Well, when popular reform candidates in Latin America get elected and begin to introduce reforms, two things typically happen. One is, there's a military coup supported by the United States. But suppose that doesn't happen. What you get is capital strike—investment capital flows out of the country, there's a lowering of investment, and the economy grinds to a halt.

That's the problem that Nicaragua has faced in the 1980s—and which it cannot overcome, in my view, it's just a hopeless problem. See, the Sandinistas have tried to run a mixed economy: they've tried to carry out social programs to benefit the population, but they've also had to appeal to the business community to prevent capital flight from destroying the place. So

most public funds, to the extent there are any, go as a bribe to the wealthy, to try to keep them investing in the country. The only problem is, the wealthy would prefer *not* to invest unless they have political power: they'd rather see the society destroyed. So the wealthy take the bribes, and they send them to Swiss banks and to Miami banks—because from their perspective, the Sandinista government just has the wrong priorities. I mean, these guys hate democracy just as much as Congress hates democracy: they want the political system to be in the hands of wealthy elites, and when it is again, then they'll call it "democracy" and they'll resume investing, and the economy will finally start to function again.

Well, the same thing would happen here if we ever had a popular reform candidate who actually achieved some formal level of power: there would be disinvestment, capital strike, a grinding down of the economy. And the reason is quite simple. In our society, real power does not happen to lie in the political system, it lies in the private economy: that's where the decisions are made about what's produced, how much is produced, what's consumed, where investment takes place, who has jobs, who controls the resources, and so on and so forth. And as long as that remains the case, changes inside the political system can make *some* difference—I don't want to say it's zero—but the differences are going to be very slight.

In fact, if you think through the logic of this, you'll see that so long as power remains privately concentrated, everybody, *everybody*, has to be committed to one overriding goal: and that's to make sure that the rich folk are happy—because unless they are, nobody else is going to get anything. So if you're a homeless person sleeping in the streets of Manhattan, let's say, your first concern must be that the guys in the mansions are happy—because if they're happy, then they'll invest, and the economy will work, and things will function, and then maybe something will trickle down to you somewhere along the line. But if they're *not* happy, everything's going to grind to a halt, and you're not even going to get anything trickling down. So if you're a homeless person in the streets, your first concern is the happiness of the wealthy guys in the mansions and the fancy restaurants. Basically that's a metaphor for the whole society.

Like, suppose Massachusetts were to increase business taxes. Most of the population is in favor of it, but you can predict what would happen. Business would run a public relations campaign—which is true, in fact, it's not lies—saying, "You raise taxes on business, you soak the rich, and you'll find that capital is going to flow elsewhere, and you're not going to have any jobs, you're not going to have anything." That's not the way they'd put it exactly, but that's what it would amount to: "Unless you make us happy, you're not going to have anything, because we own the place; you live here, but we own the place." And in fact, that's basically the message that is presented, not in those words of course, whenever a reform measure does come along somewhere—they have a big propaganda campaign saying, it's going to hurt jobs, it's going to hurt investment, there's going to be a loss of

business confidence, and so on. That's just a complicated way of saying, unless you keep business happy, the population isn't going to have anything.

MAN: *What do you think about nationalization of industry as a means of allowing for this kind of large-scale social planning?*

Well, it would depend on how it's done. If nationalization of industry puts production into the hands of a state bureaucracy or some sort of Leninist-style vanguard party, then you'd just have another system of exploitation, in my view. On the other hand, if nationalization of industry was based on actual popular control over industry—workers' control over factories, community control, with the groups maybe federated together and so on—then that would be a different story. That would be a *very* different story, in fact. That would be extending the democratic system to economic power, and unless that happens, political power is always going to remain a very limited phenomenon.

The Empire

WOMAN: *Then is the basic goal of the United States when it intervenes in Third World countries to destroy left-wing governments in order to keep them from power?*

No, the primary concern is to prevent *independence*, regardless of the ideology. Remember, we're the global power, so we have to make sure that all the various parts of the world continue serving their assigned functions in our global system. And the assigned functions of Third World countries are to be markets for American business, sources of resources for American business, to provide cheap labor for American business, and so on. I mean, there's no big secret about that—the media won't tell you and scholarship won't tell you, but all you have to do is look at declassified government documents and this is all explained very frankly and explicitly.

The internal documentary record in the United States goes way back, and it says the same thing over and over again. Here's virtually a quote: the main commitment of the United States, internationally in the Third World, must be to prevent the rise of nationalist regimes which are responsive to pressures from the masses of the population for improvement in low living standards and diversification of production; the reason is, we have to maintain a climate that is conducive to investment, and to ensure conditions which allow for adequate repatriation of profits to the West. Language like that is repeated year after year in top-level U.S. planning documents, like National Security Council reports on Latin America and so on—and that's exactly what we do around the world.⁵²

So the nationalism we oppose doesn't need to be *left-wing*—we're just as

much opposed to *right-wing* nationalism. I mean, when there's a right-wing military coup which seeks to turn some Third World country on a course of independent development, the United States will also try to destroy that government—we opposed Perón in Argentina, for example.⁵³ So despite what you always hear, U.S. interventionism has nothing to do with resisting the spread of "Communism," it's *independence* we've always been opposed to everywhere—and for quite a good reason. If a country begins to pay attention to its own population, it's not going to be paying adequate attention to the overriding needs of U.S. investors. Well, those are unacceptable priorities, so that government's just going to have to go.

And the effects of this commitment throughout the Third World are dramatically clear: it takes only a moment's thought to realize that the areas that have been the most under U.S. control are some of the most horrible regions in the world. For instance, why is Central America such a horror-chamber? I mean, if a peasant in Guatemala woke up in Poland [i.e. under Soviet occupation], he'd think he was in heaven by comparison—and Guatemala's an area where we've had a hundred years of influence. Well, that tells you something. Or look at Brazil: potentially an extremely rich country with tremendous resources, except it had the curse of being part of the Western system of subordination. So in northeast Brazil, for example, which is a rather fertile area with plenty of rich land, just it's all owned by plantations, Brazilian medical researchers now identify the population as a new species with about 40 percent the brain size of human beings, a result of generations of profound malnutrition and neglect—and this may be unremediable except after generations, because of the lingering effects of malnutrition on one's offspring.⁵⁴ Alright, that's a good example of the legacy of our commitments, and the same kind of pattern runs throughout the former Western colonies.

In fact, if you look at the countries that have developed in the world, there's a little simple fact which should be obvious to anyone on five minutes' observation, but which you never find anyone saying in the United States: the countries that have developed economically are those which were not colonized by the West; every country that was colonized by the West is a total wreck. I mean, Japan was the one country that managed to resist European colonization, and it's the one part of the traditional Third World that developed. Okay, Europe conquered everything except Japan, and Japan developed. What does that tell you? Historians of Africa have actually pointed out that if you look at Japan when it began its industrialization process [in the 1870s], it was at about the same developmental level as the Asante kingdom in West Africa in terms of resources available, level of state formation, degree of technological development, and so on.⁵⁵ Well, just compare those two areas today. It's true there were a number of differences between them historically, but the crucial one is that Japan wasn't conquered by the West and the Asante kingdom was, by the British—so now West Africa is West Africa economically, and Japan is Japan.

Japan had its own colonial system too, incidentally—but its colonies developed, and they developed because Japan didn't treat them the way the Western powers treated their colonies. The Japanese were very brutal colonizers, they weren't nice guys, but they nonetheless developed their colonies economically; the West just robbed theirs. So if you look at the growth rate of Taiwan and Korea during the period of Japanese colonization, it was approximately the same as Japan's own growth rate through the early part of this century—they were getting industrialized, developing infrastructure, educational levels were going up, agricultural production was increasing. In fact, by the 1930s, Formosa (now Taiwan) was one of the commercial centers of Asia.⁵⁶ Well, just compare Taiwan with the Philippines, an American colony right next door: the Philippines is a total basket-case, a Latin American-style basket-case. Again, that tells you something.

With World War II, the Japanese colonial system got smashed up. But by the 1960s, Korea and Taiwan were again developing at their former growth rate—and that's because in the post-war period, they've been able to follow the Japanese model of development: they're pretty closed off to foreign exploitation, quite egalitarian by international standards, they devote pretty extensive resources to things like education and health care. Okay, that's a successful model for development. I mean, these Asian countries aren't pretty; I can't stand them myself—they're extremely authoritarian, the role of women you can't even talk about, and so on, so there are plenty of unpleasant things about them. But they have been able to pursue economic development measures that are successful: the state coordinates industrial policy; capital export is strictly constrained, import levels are kept low. Well, those are exactly the kinds of policies that are *impossible* in Latin America, because the U.S. insists that those governments keep their economies *open* to international markets—so capital from Latin America is constantly flowing to the West. Alright, that's not a problem in South Korea: they have the death penalty for capital export. Solves that difficulty pretty fast.⁵⁷

But the point is, the Japanese-style development model works—in fact, it's how every country in the world that's developed has done it: by imposing high levels of protectionism, and by extricating its economy from free-market discipline. And that's precisely what the Western powers have been preventing the rest of the Third World from doing, right up to this moment.

WOMAN: *Is there any hope for disbanding America's empire, do you think?*

Well, it seems to me the situation is kind of like what one concludes from looking at the very likely potential of ecological catastrophe: either control over these matters is left in the hands of existing power interests and the rest of the population just abdicates, goes to the beach and hopes that somehow their children will survive—or else people will become sufficiently orga-

nized to break down the entire system of exploitation, and finally start putting it under participatory control. One possibility will mean complete disaster; the other, you can imagine all kinds of things. For example, even profitability would no longer be all that important—what would be important is living in a decent way.

Look, the general population here does not gain very much from holding on to our imperial system—in fact, it may gain nothing from it. If you take a look at imperial systems over history, it's not at all clear that they are profitable enterprises in the final analysis. This has been studied in the case of the British Empire, and while you only get kind of qualitative answers, it looks as if the British Empire may have cost as much to maintain as the profits that came from it. And probably something like that is true for the U.S.-dominated system too. So take Central America: there are profits from our controlling Central America, but it's very doubtful that they come anywhere near the probably ten billion dollars a year in tax money that's required to maintain U.S. domination there.⁵⁸

WOMAN: *Those costs are paid by the people, though, while the profits are made by the rich.*

That's it exactly—if you ask, “Why have an empire?” you’ve just given the answer. The empire is like every other part of social policy: it's a way for the poor to pay off the rich in their own society. So if the empire is just another form of social policy by which the poor are subsidizing the rich, that means that under democratic social planning, there would be very little incentive for it—let alone the obvious moral considerations that would become a factor at that point. In fact, all kinds of questions would just change, radically.

Change and the Future

MAN: *Mr. Chomsky, you present a very powerful view of the problems of capitalism, which I totally accept. When you start talking about the disbandance of the American population and the possibilities for large-scale change, though, I've got to admit that I have a little bit of trouble. I don't see the same general disillusionment with the system that you describe. I think people maybe see things that are wrong in certain areas, maybe see that they're powerless, but on the whole still really seem to buy into it—they think Reagan was a hands-off guy, not a figurehead created by the public relations industry.*

Well, people aren't out in the streets revolting, that's true—you can just look outside the door and see that. But by any index I know, the fact of the matter is that the public has become dramatically more dissident and skep-

tical. So for example, about half the population thinks that the government is just run by "a few big interests looking out for themselves."⁵⁹ As to whether Reagan was a hands-off guy or a figurehead, frankly that doesn't matter very much. The reality is that people either know or can quickly be convinced that *they* are not involved in policy-making, that policy is being made by powerful interests which don't have much to do with them. Now, I think they sometimes misidentify the powerful interests—for instance, they include labor unions as among them; well, that's propaganda. But when they mention corporations, big media, banks, investment firms, law firms that cater to their interests, things like that, okay, then I think they're on target.

So, yeah, people aren't out revolting in the streets, that's for sure. But I think there's plenty of potential. I mean, the environmental movement is big, and remember, it's a movement of the Seventies, not the Sixties. The Third World solidarity movements are movements of the Eighties. The anti-nuclear movement is a movement of the Eighties. The feminist movement is Seventies and Eighties. And it's way beyond movements—there are all kinds of people who are just cynical: they don't have any faith in institutions, they don't trust anybody, they hate the government, they assume they're being manipulated and controlled and that something's going on which they don't know about. Now, that's not necessarily a move to the left: that could be the basis for fascism too—it's just a question of what people do with it. I mean, this kind of depoliticized, cynical population could easily be mobilized by Jimmy Swaggart [a televangelist], or it could be organized by environmentalists. Mostly it just depends on who's willing to do the work.

WOMAN: *But do you actually believe that these positive changes will come?*

I don't know, I really haven't the slightest idea. But nobody could ever have predicted any revolutionary struggle—they're just not predictable. I mean, you couldn't have predicted in 1775 that there was going to be an American Revolution, it would have been impossible to have predicted it. But there was. You couldn't have predicted in 1954 that there was going to be a Civil Rights Movement. You couldn't have predicted in 1987 that there was going to be an uprising on the West Bank. I don't think at any stage in history it has ever been possible to decide whether to be optimistic or pessimistic, you just don't know—nobody understands how change happens, so how can you guess?

Let me just take a concrete case. In 1968, M.I.T. [the Massachusetts Institute of Technology] was the dearest place in the world—there was no anti-war activity, nothing was going on. And this was *after* the Tet Offensive: Wall Street had turned against the war, M.I.T. still hadn't heard about it. Well, a small group of students who were in a little collective on campus

decided they would set up a sanctuary for a soldier who deserted; that was the kind of thing activists were doing back then. There was this working-class Marine kid who wanted to desert as an anti-war gesture, so the idea was, people would stay with him until the cops came, then they'd try to make a public issue out of it. There was a discussion about this among ten or fifteen students and two or three faculty members—and I came out against it, because I was totally pessimistic; I thought it couldn't possibly work, I thought that it would be a complete fiasco. But they went ahead with it.

Well, it turned out to be an *incredible* success. I mean, within about two days, the whole of M.I.T. was totally shut down—there weren't any classes, nothing was going on, the whole student body was over in the Student Center. It turned into a 24-hour mixture of seminars, and you know, this horrible music that people listen to, all that kind of stuff—it was very exciting. And it just changed the whole character of the place; ever since then, M.I.T. has not been the same. I mean, it's not that it turned into Utopia or anything, but a lot of concern developed and a lot of activity started up, which still continues, on issues which people didn't even consider before. Well, could you have guessed? I mean, I guessed wrong, they guessed right. But as far as I can see, it was basically like flipping a coin.