

On the United-States and Social Movements : Interview with Noam Chomsky

<http://www.autrefutur.net/On-the-United-Sates-and-Social>

This recent interview with Noam Chomsky in Boston is part of a more general inquiry into social issues and activist movements in the United States, that we conducted over the past few months on the East Coast, from Baltimore and Philadelphia to New-York and Boston. The rest will be published soon.

Can you first describe the current social and economic situation of the US, for people who don't know a lot about it ?

Noam Chomsky : It's worth taking a look at the situation since the Second World War. In 1945, the United-States was the richest and most powerful country in world history. It had half the world's wealth, an incomparable security, enormous opportunities, tremendous internal advantages, huge internal market, resources and so on... Of course, that could not remain. So it's been slowly declining since. But it's still today by far the most powerful country in the world with incomparable advantages though it's not as powerful as it was seventy years ago. The 50's and the 60's were the period of the greatest economic growth rate in American history and the most sustained in world history. It was an egalitarian growth, the top quintile and the bottom quintile grew up about the same way. It was also a period of substantial social development, dealing with the race problem which has played a role in American history since the beginning. This, of course, was a slave society, as tremendously as was France. France had its slaves abroad, for the most part, but it's still the same structure. Slaves here were internal. A good part of the modern economy, actually, developed sort of slave labor camps. For France, it is estimated roughly that about 20% of French wealth comes from Haiti, France's richest colony, which was devastated by French rule and, similarly, Africa. For the United States, it's the internal slave labor camps which produced most of the cotton on which the modern industrial revolution rested, industries, finances, commerce and so on. That remains a problem. I mean it hasn't disappeared. But there were some steps towards ameliorating it in the 50's and particularly in the 60's. And there was substantial economic growth, the beginning of social movements on other issues, for example women's rights, which was one of the most important.

By the 1970's, a backlash began. Actually, it began earlier, in the 1940's. The business world was beginning to react to the democratisation and social policies of the New Deal and the war time period. So it began by an attack on labor in the 40's but it really took off in the 1970's for various reasons. Since then, there's in general, over the world, kind of neoliberal assaults on the global population, taking different forms in different places. In the United States, it led to a situation in which for the majority of the population wages and the incomes have pretty much stagnated. It's slightly increased and declined for some, but relatively stagnated. For example, the real wages for male workers today are about what they were in the 1960's. The minimum wage which has been much discussed during the 1950's and 60's tracked productivity growth. As the economy grew, minimum wage grew. But that stopped in the early 70's, late 60's. By now, the minimum wage is maybe half as much as it

would be if it had kept up with the economic growth. I mean, well, of course, there has been economic growth but it has been highly concentrated in the last ten years, in favor of the top 1%, a fraction of the 1%.

And its character is changing. One of the elements of this neoliberal attack has been the rapid growth of the financial institutions. In the 1950's and 60's, banks were essentially banks... If you had access to cash, you put it in the bank, the bank lend it to somebody to buy a car or something like that. That changed in the 70's. The banks became investment firms. With the development of computers, they turned to super-rapid trading, which mostly has no effect or a negative effect on the economy. But that became huge. Right on the eve of the latest financial crisis, 2007, the financial institutions, which were largely responsible for the crisis, had about 40% of corporate profits. The banks benefit from a government assurance policy. It's tacit but, around us, it's there. Sometimes it's called "Too big to fail" in informal terms. There was a recent IMF study that found that the profits of the big banks lie overwhelmingly, maybe entirely, on the tacit subsidy. It's not just the bail out. It's access to cheap credit, inflated credit ratings, encouragements to do risky, hence profitable, investments because if they fail, you're bailed out and so on and so on. Actually the business process to make this is over 80 billions dollars a year, taxpayer subsidy. They're basically predatory institutions and a huge part of economy, and very powerful politically.

Along with all of this has come a centralization of political power. Political power tends to follow concentration of wealth for obvious reasons. The wealthier are much more influential, they determine legislation and implementation of rules and so on. So there's been an increasing concentration, kind of, essentially, disenfranchisement of much of the population. If you look at mainstream research in political science, one of the main topics investigated is the relation between attitudes and policy. There's very extensive polling about attitudes and policy. And the rough result is that maybe three quarters of the population, at the lower end of the income scale, are essentially disenfranchised. Their opinions have no effect on policy. As you move up the scale, you have a little bit of influence. At the very top, policies are made. It's effectively a plutocracy. Formal democracy but functioning plutocracy. We don't have direct evidence but apparently people are pretty well aware of that. You can see that in the voting participation. So, one of the main, most respected mainstream scholars dealing with electoral politics, Walter Dean Burnham, did thirty years ago demographic studies on non-voters in the United States. He pointed out that there's roughly the same as Europeans who vote for one of the labour based or social-democratic parties, except these parties don't exist here : they just don't vote. He had a colleague, Thomas Ferguson, who just wrote an interesting article on the latest elections, November 2014. He did a detailed analysis, district by district, of who was voting and who wasn't and the conclusion was pretty striking. The voting participation was about the way it was in the early 19th century. At that time, voting was restricted to propertied white males. Now, we're technically free but the voting participation is about the same. Which, he concludes, probably reflects people just giving up on the political system. That's even true in attitudes toward institutions. The faith in institutions has generally declined very sharply. And for political institutions, it's negligible. Approval of congress is maybe 10%, nonexistent. It's the same with others institutions, except for the military. It still has high prestige. But very few others institutions do.

So there are changes that have taken place. Along with this, the role of money in politics has pretty sharply increased. It's not like it was negligible before. In fact, it has always been

enormous. But there's been a significant increase in recent years. To this extent, the elections are virtually bought. You can pretty well predict the outcome of most elections, just looking at a campaign's money. Of course, this money is highly concentrated, it's not individuals giving 10 dollars.

Did social movements play an important role over these past decades ? Do you think they have an impact on the social and political situation ?

NC : The social movements had a big impact. The things I mentioned as the improvement, limited but still significant, in civil rights, specially for the black population, the rise of the women's movement which had a very big impact on the society or the beginnings of the environmental movement. There's been a quite substantial and effective anti-nuclear war movement and so on. These are social movements. They changed the character of the society. For example, right now, one social issue is same sex marriage, gay rights. Now, the majority of the population supports it. You go back a few years ago, it was anathema. In fact, there were laws penalizing sodomy and so on. That's a pretty sharp change and it reflects general cultural changes which are results of social movements. They have an impact on social life, undubitably. If you go in the hall of MIT today, you'll see about half women, maybe a third minorities. If you walked through the hall, when I got here, sixty years ago, it would have been well-dressed white males, obedient, doing their work and so on. That's a huge change. There's a lot more activism, totally different kinds of interactions. That's not just here, that's all over the country, in fact over much in the world, the same in France. So there's indeed an impact of social movements.

On the other hand, if you take a look at the economy and the political system, that's been going in the opposite direction, towards more power, concentrated private power. In fact, some of the political movements which are relatively popular, not huge but have a fair degree of popularity here, including many educated young people, are the so-called "libertarians". Whatever they think they're doing, in fact, if you look at their policies, they're calling for the most extreme tyranny that has ever existed. Power in the hands of unaccountable private institutions. Private power. You can't get worse than that. They say and think they're libertarians but they're anti-libertarian. It's a kind of reflection of a cultural malaise in the society.

As far as the political parties are concerned, back in the 1950's, there used to be kind of a joke that is the United-States is a one-party state, the business party, with two factions called democrats and republicans. This is no longer quite true. It's still a one-party state, the business party. But it's not democrats. The democrats are basically gone. It's moderate republicans. They're called democrats. If you take Clinton style democrats, their positions are roughly what would have been called moderate republicans thirty years ago. Meanwhile the republican party has just moved totally off the spectrum. It's not a legitimate parliamentary party anymore. In fact, one of the leading conservative commentor, respected commentator, Norman Ornstein, simply describes it as a radical insurgency that abandons parliamentary participation. The republican party has policies. But they have to keep their policies pretty quiet. Their policies are total dedication to the interests of the very wealthy and the corporate sector. You can't win votes that way. So what they've done is shift to what they call cultural social issues, like gun rights, anti-abortion, religion in the schools, fear that whites are becoming a minority and they've taken away our country from us. All of this range of feelings which are very widespread in the country.

Can you be more specific about this religious aspect of the United States ?

NC : It's a very religious country. Extreme fundamentalist country, certainly more than any western country, far more. For example, take the US attitude towards Israel. And take a look at opinion. Amongst Christians, a majority thinks that God gave Palestine to the Jews. Evangelical Christians, who are a very large part of the Republican Party, a substantial plurality, maybe 80%, think that if God declares something, you don't argue about it, especially in a very religious society. Other things, too. This morning, for example. If you look at the newspapers, there's a frontpage story about how Pope Francis is apparently producing an encyclical calling for concern for global warming. And the article in the New York Times is about how he's been attacked by leading Catholics of big business in the US for daring to say we shouldn't destroy ourselves. Because they don't believe the facts, which is pretty remarkable. We're actually in a situation where we are on a precipice. We could destroy the possibility for a decent existence, we probably will in a fairly short time. But talking about it is anathema. In fact, if you look at polls, even in a state like Massachusetts, a liberal educated state, I think that only 70% of the population agrees that global warming is taking place and that humans have a role in it. If you take the Evangelicals, let's say it's much lower.

What can you say about the American unions ? I know you're a member of the revolutionnary syndicalist union IWW. Can you tell us about it ? What does that mean for you and what is the difference with the other unions in the US ?

NC : I'm a member but not really an active member and not because I wouldn't like to be but there's just too much to do... The IWW was quite a powerful union back about a century ago. But it was simply destroyed by state violence. It never recovered. In fact, during the Woodrow Wilson administration, the red scare virtually destroyed the labor movement and particularly the IWW, which was targeted harshly. But that was true of the general labor movement as well. The leading figure in the american labor movement, Eugene Debs, who was a kind of social-democrat, basically the socialist party candidate in elections, was jailed by Woodrow Wilson for a speech in which he addressed working people and said "you should think about the nature of the world war and you should ask yourself: do you want to participate in an imperialist war ?". Just a speech of that character. He was jailed and at the end of the war, a couple of years after the war, there was an amnesty by Wilson, but Debs was one person who was not amnestied. That was typical of what was happening to labor movement. The IWW were virtually wiped out and never recovered. The labor movement itself did recover in the 1930's, during the depression. In fact, it spearheaded the New Deal legislation, CIO organizing, sit-down strikes and other militant activities. But the IWW couldn't be reconstituted, it didn't completely die, there was a fringe but... In recent years, there's been an attempt by younger people, mostly to rebuild it and I think it's a good thing. They're doing some decent things but it's on the margins.

In fact, the labor movement itself has been under severe attack since 1940's. It had made considerable progress during the 30's and during the depression and the war. It's a part of the world war phenomena. All over the world, most of the world, the depression and the war instigated a kind of a wave of radical democracy. It took many forms. Communism, socialism, something else but some sort of general world-wide feeling we've got to do something about this oppressive and destructive system. And the first task of the so-called

liberators of Europe, United-States and Britain was to crush this. It started in 1943 when the British and Americans entered Italy. One of their first tasks was to destroy the partisans. The partisans were a major movement in Italy. They had held down six German divisions, virtually liberated northern Italy before the allied forces arrived. And they were developing workers councils eliminating management. It was a pretty radical mood. And it was probably offensive to the Americans and the British, that was insane for the British Labour Party. So they dismantled the old business and pretty much reinstalled the traditional system, including fascist collaborators. Similar policies were applied throughout Europe. In Greece, it was murders. The same thing was happening here in the US, but not some murderers but an attack which cut back the unions to the point we're right now. In the private sector, it's less than 7%.

What are the most interesting militant activities or social movements in the US, today or in recent years, in your opinion ?

NC : Well, there's quite a variety. And if you count the participants, it's quite a lot. But they're quite scattered, they tend to be issue-oriented. So there's a movement on, let's say, gay rights or environmental issues or "Black lives matter", these kinds of things. Lots of different movements are kind of loosely sympathetic to one another, they're not integrated. There are attempts to integrate them. One of the most interesting ones, I think, is an organization that has been initiated by Gar Alperovitz and James Speth, Next System Project. That's an interesting effort to try to integrate different tendencies and direct them towards pretty radical objectives. Mainly changing the structure of ownership. So it's one of the few efforts to really go to the heart of the economic and political system. The ideas considered range from total elimination to workers's councils community and so on to more limited efforts to develop worker-owned enterprises, democratic communities, into a shifting of a corporation's responsibility from shareholder's, stakeholder's, a kind of cutaway of the system. So that whole range of efforts that they want to try to bring in, a range of social movements that exist : LGBT, environmental, everything...

But it's incipio. I mean it's a very atomised country. People don't talk to each other. If you take Boston, there's people in different parts of the city, working on the same topics, who don't know each other. In fact, I give a lot of talks around the country. One of the main objectives, for me at least, is to bring people together in the same area. People don't know each other but they're doing the same thing. They show up at the talk, get to know each other, read each other literature and so on... it's a major problem, specially in a big scattered country like this.

Do you think that Occupy Wall Street was an important movement ?

NC : It was important. It had an impact. The main impact is to put the issue of inequality right in the center of the agenda. I mean, people knew about it but much less. Now, it's everywhere. So 1%, 99%, everybody understands. But Occupy was a tactic, it wasn't a movement. You can't occupy for too long. It has a half-life, you can do it for a while and you have to do something else. That was understood. There were attempts to develop it so it could move into communities, pick up local issues and so on. There's a degree of success, not as much as many hoped.

I know you meet many activists and are familiar with what's going on, generally speaking. Would you say that activist movements have some bad aspects which could be improved so that social movements become stronger ?

NC : Well, I don't have anything profound to say and I don't think there's anything profound to say. But there are a few obvious things that people should bare in mind. There's a tendency on the left, generally, to become highly sectarian and to commit yourself to a particular set of beliefs and goals and disparage anyone who's two millimeters off to the side. That's very destructive and also it doesn't make any sense. None of us are smart enough to have the answer to the way to proceed or the goal to try to achieve. We can have our ideas, we can learn from one another. But the goal is a society of mutual support, mutual sympathy and the means have to reflect that. Otherwise, we'll never reach that goal. I think that requires a degree of tolerance and self-doubt that is typically lacking in social movements. There's a lot of arrogance, just misplaced, unwillingness to tolerate or think about or sympathize with other ideas. That's relevant even for a thing like the people you regard as your opponents, many people regard as opponents. Take, let's say, Christian Evangelicals. I mean, this is a large part of the population. It's a faith that I think is very destructive to them and to others but they have reasons. If you look at the reasons, sometimes you can sympathize with them and you can reach the people and work with them. I'm as far away from any religion as anybody can be but I have no problem living in a Jesuit house in Nicaragua, working with the Jesuit community, for example.

You're of course a famous academic. What can you say about the American academic world ? Do you think it should be criticized ?

NC : There are good aspects in the academic world. But there's a lot of negative tendencies. They have always been there but they're getting worse. In the last decades, during this neoliberal period, the academic world wasn't immune to it. In the United States, England, Canada, other countries, there's a strong pressure to introduce kind of a business model into the entire education system. So at a lower level, kids at 12, there's pressure to introduce a system of teaching to test, which is the worst form of education. It means obedience, memorization, regurgitation, discourages independant inquiry, challenge, open-mindedness and so on. That's, I think, very harmful. Plenty of teachers are strongly opposed, I think, for good reasons. It's largely disciplinary. It's called accountability but that's nonsense. If you want accountability, you can give exactly the same test but just not judge people on. That's the way it's done in progressive education. I went in a Dewey high school when I was a kid. We had tests, but they never ranked anybody. They were just giving informations on how things are going. So students were never ranked. I never knew I was a good student, nothing like that. So it can be done. Accountability is a joke. It's disciplinary, both of students and teachers and that's very harmful.

At the university level, there's a process of corporatization, huge growth of administrators, way out of line of anything else, rising too which have no economic justifications. But it is disciplinary and a shift toward sort of "selling yourself on the market". Right here, for example. Public funding has been pretty free actually, particularly from the Pentagon, they didn't care much what you did. There's an increase of corporate funding, which tends to be more short-term, profit-oriented, and it has a kind of cheapening effect. That's part of the general neoliberal program, applied to these institutions.

Interview by Fabien Delmotte [21.06.15]