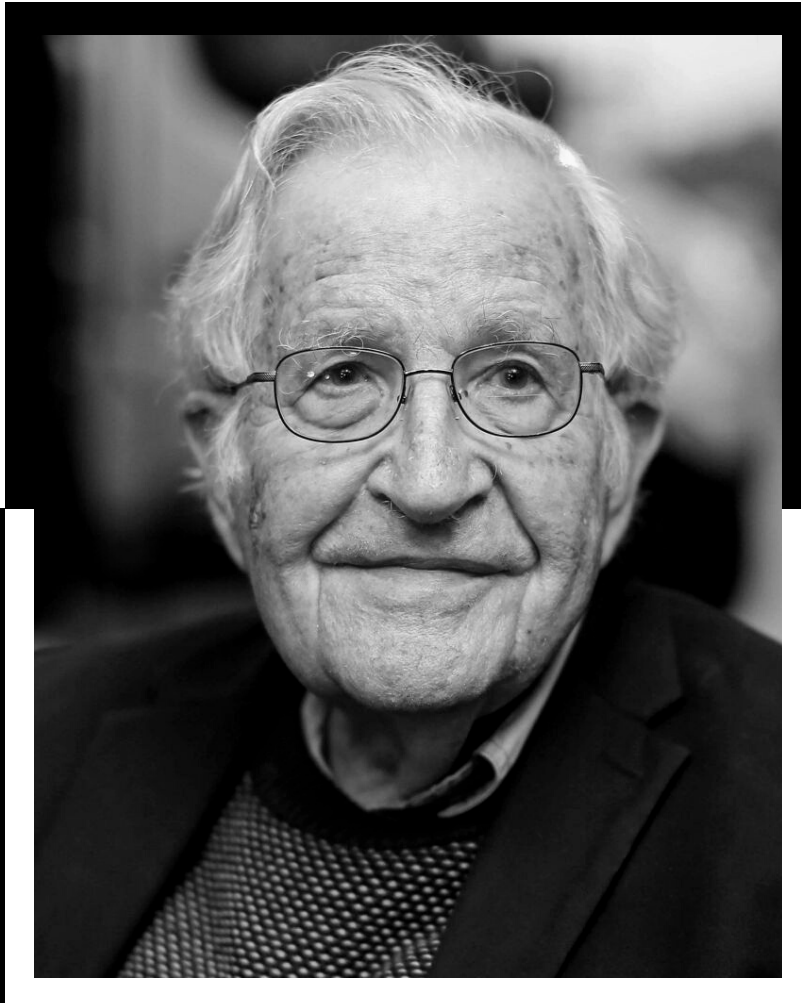


IN CONVERSATION WITH NOAM CHOMSKY



Noam Chomsky is a pioneering linguist, one of the founders of the field of cognitive sciences, and one of the most influential public intellectuals in the world. Alongside his contribution to the field of linguistics, Prof. Chomsky is also widely known and deeply admired for being one of the most prominent political theorist and commentator of our time. Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona and an Institute Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he has written over a 100 books, his most recent one being "The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and Urgent Need for Radical Change."

The internet has brought a large increase in accessibility and usage of political text and literature. However, this increase has not been accompanied by a similar increase in the understanding of various political movements among the public. A lot of people use words like fascism, feminism and socialism in a reduced state as everyday lingo while overshadowing their political significance. In a recent interview with the Catalyst, you mentioned "People use fascism to describe anything rotten these days." How do you think this disconnect between political words and their significance is affecting the state of political resistance and understanding in today's youth?

Well, the crucial phrase here is "the large increase in accessibility". But accessibility is not the same as access. The accessibility is there but the question is, are people using it? And the answer to that seems to be not very much. Yes, it's possible, say in the United States to read the Indian press and learn a lot about India. Do people do it? Almost nobody. Do people read the New York Times? Not much. Young people are getting their information from Facebook and Twitter, which gives you a filtered version of what appears in the mainstream press. Facebook does not have bureaus in New Delhi or Karachi, it simply takes information that comes from elsewhere and filters it down. Furthermore, there is a very strong tendency for people on the internet to turn to particular channels that reinforce their own beliefs. I am not immune to that either, I'm sure no one is. The effect of that is that you tend to lose contact with what is happening in the world and hear only your own perspective on the world

being reinforced and elaborated. So, accessibility is there but the exploitation of that accessibility is very slight.

What's happening is that there has also been a cheapening and vulgarisation of discourse, including the words that you mentioned. But, I should say that it's not anything new, it is just an expansion of what has already existed. Take words like "liberal" and "conservative". What are they supposed to mean? We barely have any conception of what those words once meant and what they mean now. This, I think, is happening quite generally. I'm sure you're much more familiar with it than I am, since I don't use social media. But I suspect that you all use them very extensively, which is typical of the younger generation. Hence, to repeat the main point: while you *do* have accessibility, do you *make use* of that accessibility? If you're in the United States, and you want to learn about the Middle East, do you turn to Al Jazeera? It's there, but not many people are going to go there, they might go to Fox News or whatever reinforces their beliefs or perhaps social media sites which are even more narrow. That's unfortunate and it requires serious educational organisational programs to encourage people to make use of the available resources. They are not of any use if they just exist and nobody looks at them.

You have said in interviews that an intense nationalism often comes when there is an authoritative State in power. However, in many colonised countries (such as India) a strong sense of nationalism was purposefully built in order to create a sense of unity in order to resist colonial policies.

Does this form of nationalism also have an equal chance of turning against the democratic nature of the state?

I don't know how to measure whether it is an equal chance or a stronger chance, but it certainly has that possibility. You can tell me more about it than I can tell you because you're living right in the middle of it.

Indian nationalism did lead to a democratic secular society, there were plenty of flaws, but by international standards, Indian democracy ranked quite high for many years. However, it is now moving into extreme autocracy, an attack on secular democracy which is quite explicit or strong. There's a strong move to create a Hindu ethnocracy which will not be democratic internally and which will suppress second class citizens, especially Muslims. The rights of the minorities will be crushed, like it's being done in Kashmir. So, the answer is yes; a nationalist movement that arose against colonialism and established a vibrant secular democracy can degenerate into an autocratic, anti-democratic state, Hindu ethnocracy, and you're seeing it happen before your eyes.

Does it have to happen? No, people can prevent it but it's going to take plenty of work to try to combat religious extremism, combined with super-nationalist hysteria, which is a very difficult task. We face that task in the United States (second oldest democracy), in India (the largest democracy), we're facing it in Brazil. Some of the major, long-term democracies are facing this decline. The European Union just classed the United States as one of the states that's declining from democracy towards a kind of proto-fascism. They're not wrong and India is another case.

In fact, to some extent the same is happening in the oldest democracy i.e. England; when Boris Johnson, a couple of years ago, suspended parliament because he wanted to ram through his own version of Brexit. That was a serious attack on British democracy—and it was recognised as such, if you read the British newspapers of the time, the leading legal authorities were infuriated. The British supreme court finally stepped in and banned it, but it was too late because he had already achieved what he had wanted. Then Johnson went on, after he had signed the Brexit agreement, to immediately say that England will not live up to it, that “we’ll do what we want”, that they’ll not live up to it no matter what they signed—another major attack on democracy and international law. Hence, some of the major, long-term democracies are facing this decline at different paces, and to different degrees. India is perhaps the most extreme case of democracy decay. So the answer to the question is, yes it can happen, and we’re witnessing it.

In a democracy, citizens are meant to have an important say in matters of public policy, at least in theory. A lot of policy decisions, even in India, are not publicly favourable or supported, yet it is often accepted because the government or policy makers "know better" and have the citizens' best interests in mind. What do you think should be the role of everyday citizens in shaping domestic, foreign and military policy decisions or are more complicated matters better left to the "experts"?

That's a very interesting question and leads in many directions. First, let's take the last claim: are complicated matters better left to the experts?

Well, the experts will tell you that. But if you look at the records, you'll find out that they're mostly experts in failure and disaster. Take the United States, during the Kennedy years, early 1960s, there was a major movement to leave things to the experts. There was a distinction made between what was called the technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals, the good guys; and, what were called, the "value-oriented" individuals, the bad guys—who cared about things like justice, freedom, human rights, all kinds of such sentimentality. You had to leave things to the "experts", the ones who immediately led the United States into a vast war of aggression and violence which almost destroyed Indo-China. Those are the "experts". They also instituted programs in South America, U.S. domains, under Kennedy. I'll quote the head of counter-insurgency for Kennedy and Johnson; looking at what happened, he said that Kennedy's decisions in South America meant that the United States shifted from tolerating the rapacity and brutality of the South American military to directly participation in crimes of the kind that were carried out by the Nazis. That's the "experts". We can go on with such examples. The experts told us that we should invade Iraq and Afghanistan, the experts told us that we should impose the neo-liberal rules which have devastated the world including the United States for the last forty years. These are the expert decisions. Should we leave the decisions to them? They would tell you to do that. Mainly, the "masters of mankind", as Adam Smith called them, those who control capital and wealth, they are the ones who pick the experts, who work for them and not for everyday citizens.

So everyday citizens should be aware that they should not leave these straight-forward matters—they're not very complicated—to the experts, but citizens should be involved themselves.

The first part of the question says "citizens are meant to have an important say in matters of public policy, *at least in theory*." Yes, in theory, but not in practice. You can talk about India, I'll talk about the United States. The major book on the constitution of the United States, the formation of the country, the gold-standard in scholarship is called "The Framers' Coup", the coup that the Framers' carried out against democracy. And that's exactly what the constitution was. The constitution was designed to block the democratic efforts of the general public and to ensure that the "men of best quality", as they were called, would have the decisive role in policy. In the constitution, the main power was placed in the Senate, a Senate which wasn't elected.

It wasn't until 1913 that the Senate was elected. We're talking about 1776, 1789. The Senate was supposed to represent the wealth of the nation, the people who respect property and its rights. James Madison, the framer, said that a primary role of government is to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority. So, the constitution itself was a strongly anti-democratic document. It was constructed by a group of white, male, wealthy, slave-owners who met in Philadelphia to carry out a coup against democracy. That's how the country was founded.

Let's come to the modern period, the twentieth century. Leading public liberal intellectuals, what do they say about democracy?

Let's take Walter Lippmann, a respected liberal intellectual of the twentieth century, a Wilson-Roosevelt-Kennedy liberal. He did a lot of writing on democracy. He said that people have to be spectators, not participants in democracy; the participants are the responsible men, people like me—educated white experts will take care of things; we have to be protected from the general population; the general population has to be put in its place, they are ignorant and meddlesome outsiders; we, the experts will run things because we know better. That's democratic theory and it plays out daily. Take a look at what is happening today, in Congress. There is a debate going on about a major bill that the Biden administration proposed which is intended to bring the United States into the civilized world. I mean that literally. The United States is very backward on matters of elementary social justice. For example, take some simple matters such as maternity leave—the right of a mother to stay with her baby for some period after birth. The United States is virtually alone in the world in denying this right. It's joined by a few small islands in the Pacific. You go to the second largest country in the western hemisphere, Brazil, you have four months of guaranteed, paid, maternal leave and an extra two months of optional leave at public expense. United States, zero. If you go to Europe, you not only have maternal leave, you have paternal leave. United States, zero. Take the health system, the U.S. is one of the few countries in the world that doesn't have a public health system. It has private health systems. That means that the costs are about twice as high as comparable countries and the outcomes are among the worst in the modern developed societies. That's what happens when you privatize healthcare. You have your own version

in India. Health expenditures in India are among the lowest in modern countries. I think it's about 1% of the GDP. There are very good hospitals, but they're private, for the rich. There is a public health system, but it's barely supported. Is that what the people want? Absolutely not. I know that in the United States polls show that overwhelmingly people want a public health system which people have access to. But they're not getting it. Why? Because the bill that is now in Congress, which will probably be voted down, the Republicans are a hundred percent against anything that might benefit the general population, they work for the rich and powerful in the corporate sector and enough Democrats have joined them so it probably won't pass. If you look at the measures in the bill - like what I mentioned and many others- it turns out the public strongly favours them. But it doesn't matter as the public doesn't have a voice. In fact, there are careful studies in mainstream political science studying the extent to which people are represented by their own representatives. That is, if you compare what people prefer to what their representatives vote for, there's essentially no correlation for the lower 70% of the population in wealth. As you move up the level of wealth, you get more correlation because there the representatives are listening to the rich and the powerful. The elections are pretty much bought, you can predict the outcome of an election pretty well just by looking at campaign funding. That means when a representative is elected, the first thing he does is get on the telephone to make sure that the funders will fund his next election. That means he's listening to their voices, not to the voices of his constituents, the people who voted for him. That's quite apart from the fact that Congress is overwhelmed with masses of corporate

lobbyists who greatly outnumber the congressional staff themselves. Hence they pretty much write the legislation. Well, so let's go back to the words at least in theory. Yes, in theory but not in practice. I'm sure you can duplicate the story in India. The conclusion is, no, the "experts" do not know better. What they do know better is what their masters want, not what is in the citizens' best interest. Therefore, everyday citizens should shape policy. You've just seen a remarkable example of this in India. The Farmers Strike, that's the everyday citizens participating in shaping policy. The autocratic government finally had to back down. It's a great victory for democracy and for the courageous farmers movement. That's what citizens should be doing, on every issue.

Your advice while teaching children languages is to focus on cultivating interest, rather than focusing on the method of teaching. However, it's often seen that even when the school curriculum offers reading lists that specifically cater to teenage interests (eg. offering popular young-adult novels such as "Harry Potter" and "The Hunger Games" in the course curriculum), instead of being interested in learning, they end up losing interest in the book (which once was interesting to them). What could be the reason behind this reaction? Does it hint towards a fundamental failure of the schooling system?

If you look into it, I think what you'll find out is very poor teaching. Maybe they read Harry Potter, but they probably read it in a mechanical way without the encouragement of the teacher to see what's of interest and value.

I've had my own experience with this with my grandchildren. The Harry Potter books came out before they were able to read, so I read them to them, they loved them. As soon as they were just barely beginning to be able to read- just barely, they wanted to get rid of me and read them themselves. When the Harry Potter books were announced, that they're going to appear today, every kid in the city where I lived was standing at the bookstores waiting to get the first copy, as soon as they were put on the shelves, running home, sitting in a corner and reading them, as they were excited by them.

And, teachers have had the same experience- teaching them properly just means encouraging the students to do what they want to do anyway. Children are inquisitive, they're always asking questions, being a nuisance and they're constantly asking why. You give them an answer to one question, you're asked another question. Well, good teaching can either stifle that by saying "shut up and do your work" or it can encourage it and let it develop. Those are two methods of teaching. Go back to the Enlightenment, a couple 100 years ago, the first method of teaching was ridiculed, it was described as pouring water into a vessel and then having it come out of the vessel in a test. Every one of you, I'm sure, has taken courses in school where you had absolutely no interest in it. You studied for the exam, you did well, 2 weeks later you forgot what the course was about. That's the worst possible form of teaching- teaching to test at school. Pour water into the vessel, some of it comes out in tests. The right kind of teaching is encouraging children to do what they want to do anyway. Explore, understand, investigate, discover on your own.

What you discover on your own becomes a part of you. What's poured into you like a vessel is not part of you, you forget it right away. Now in the case of the Harry Potter books, I don't know the cases you're mentioning, what I strongly suspect, if you look into them, you will find that it's the quality of the instructional system that led to the result you're describing.

You've famously said: "Citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course of intellectual self-defence to protect themselves from manipulation and control." Could you elaborate on the importance of this practice, especially among students?

Let's take concrete examples, say what you just brought up in a previous question - we should leave things to the "experts" because they "know what's best." Who are we? We're just ordinary, simple people, how can we understand these important things that the "experts" understand, like the health system should be privatised so that most of the population doesn't have access to it or we should invade Iraq, or we should destroy Indo-China or we should support South American killers. That's what the "experts" say, what do we know? Well, that's where you have to start with a course of intellectual self-defence. The "experts" tell us, "listen to us, we know everything, you don't know everything". You should ask, who says? Show me that you know what I don't know. What's so complicated about the question of whether to invade Iraq on fabricated evidence that you invented. Is it hard to figure out? What's so hard to figure out about why we should establish policies which enrich the very rich and impoverish everyone else. Is that hard to figure out?

Is it hard to figure out why you're giving that advice? Who pays your salary? Who pays your campaign spending? Doesn't take much brilliance to figure that out. So, that's intellectual self-defence, when you're told "shut up and listen", you should ask why. Why should I do that? Why shouldn't I participate equally in the decisions that affect my life? If there are things that have to be learned, why can't I learn about them? It goes all the way back to every aspect of life. Suppose you have a job in a factory, you are then essentially the slave of a master. You're spending almost your entire waking life following the orders of a master. Does that have to be that way? Could you and your fellow employees run the place yourselves? That's the way working people thought for most of history. It's only in very recent times that workers have agreed that they have to be subordinate to masters. Go back to the early industrial revolution, they fought against this bitterly. To be a subject to a master is an attack on personal rights and dignity that no decent person can accept. Probably the whole working class fought hard to resist this imposition. Finally, class war succeeded in crushing this instinct. But, it can be brought to the fore and it should be. Again you should ask yourself, why should I accept that? Why should I accept living in an autocracy so extreme that Stalin couldn't have imagined it. Stalin couldn't have told you "You're allowed to go to the bathroom at 3 o'clock in the afternoon for 5 minutes, here are the clothes you have to wear, you're not allowed to talk to that person next to you because you want to stop work for a second" Stalin couldn't have said that, but your boss can. So, why should you accept that, for almost your entire waking life? Those are questions you can ask too.

They're not new questions, they were asked by working people right through the industrial revolution. They're still being asked, when workers go on strike, they're saying, "I'm not going to accept this. I'm going to insist on what I want". It's a hard battle, class war is difficult but that's the way progress is made. Take the feminist movement - different countries are in different stages of it. In the United States, if you were to ask my grandmother, are her rights being trampled, she wouldn't have even known what you're talking about. Women are supposed to serve, they're supposed to take care of the home, they're supposed to do what they're told, if they vote, if they vote at all, they're supposed to vote the way their husband tells them, that's life. Her rights aren't being trampled because she didn't recognize she had any rights. And now, if you ask my daughter, she'll tell you to "get out and leave me alone, I have my rights and I know what they are, I'm fighting for them." Well that's a transition that took place actually in a generation and it means not listening to what you're told, not accepting what you're told is your place in the world but carrying out a program of intellectual self-defence and asking yourself- What are my rights? What do I want? What do I have the right to ask for? Why should I listen to these people who are preaching to me from above? They don't know anything, they're serving other masters. We should take our lives into our own hands, every aspect of life. That's a program of intellectual self-defence. It's not that hard, we've seen many examples of it, just in very recent years. Feminist movement is a dramatic example, there are many others.

Social media has become an important source of information for many people

by allowing the dissemination of diverse opinions, does it have the potential to reduce the agenda-setting abilities of national media and create a space for critical evaluation of issues or does it continue to serve the interests of the dominant elite through marginalisation of alternative opinion? Also, what has your experience with social media been, or is it something you don't engage with at all?

Well, I'm actually not the best person to ask because I don't use social media. I keep away from them. Of course I see what's in them because people send me things and occasionally I look something up. But, by and large I keep away from them. Social media can be very valuable. Most activist organisations these days are on social media. You want to have a major demonstration in Glasgow, to try to save the world from destruction by the people who are inside the halls, producing pretty words and doing nothing. You want to save the world from destruction, you have tens of thousands of people, mostly young people, demonstrating in the streets, organised through social media. That's the main ends of doing and that's true of much else as well. Social media *can* be used for very constructive purposes. They can be used for information, for informing people about what they haven't been thinking about, or what doesn't reach them. All of that is possible but is it done? To some extent, yes. But unfortunately, the major effect of social media is to isolate people. It's to separate them into self-reinforcing groups of more-or-less like-minded people who are not getting a proper and accurate picture of the world and are not becoming engaged where they ought to.

The choice between these two ways of using social media is in our hands. It doesn't have to be one way or another. It's like all the other things we've been talking about. Things can go in ugly and unfortunate directions. India can people about what they haven't been thinking about, or what doesn't reach them. All of that is possible but is it done? To some extent, yes. But unfortunately, the major effect of social media is to isolate people. It's to separate them into self-reinforcing groups of more-or-less like-minded people who are not getting a proper and accurate picture of the world and are not becoming engaged where they ought to. The choice between these two ways of using social media is in our hands. It doesn't have to be one way or another. It's like all the other things we've been talking about. Things can go in ugly and unfortunate directions. India can move towards autocratic, harsh ethnocracy or it can revive a vibrant democracy that can be a model for the world. Those are choices in your hands, and the same is true of social media, the same is true for everything else we've discussed. There is no inevitability. We know that from history, and from very recent experience, like for example, the feminist movement. And it means it's just up to you to decide what kind of world you want to live in. And, in fact, if we go back to Glasgow,

the choice is very stark. The choice is, do we want to have a world at all? If things proceed on their present course, in another generation or two, South Asia will be unlivable. Unlivable, literally. It will be too hot to live in, too many droughts to live in, it's already approaching that level. You get to a point where in Rajasthan last year, temperatures went briefly to 50 degrees celsius, that's not liveable. Maybe very rich people can figure out a way to survive that, but most people can't.

That's going to be South Asia as things are now moving. The rest of the world is in bad enough trouble, serious trouble. Where I live in the Southwest United States, there is a very severe long-standing drought. What you can't deal with is the result of heating the atmosphere. We go on like this, we're all finished, just at different rates. So yes, there are very serious problems to deal with, and can be dealt with. We know how to do it, the means are there, they're available but they have to be taken. That's the most serious issue that's arisen in human history. There are many others, they all have the same answer—we have means to deal with them but those means are of no use unless we grab the opportunities. That's hard, but not doing it is even worse. And, that's what you face.