

Radio Havana Interviews Chomsky

by Noam Chomsky; September 04, 2003

Telephone interview by Bernie Dwyer for www.cubadebate.cu with Professor Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 28th August 2003. The agreed theme of the interview was 'Corporate Journalism' but, like all good interviews, the topic spread to take in many other themes - always with the rigorous political analysis that we are used to from Professor Chomsky.

[Bernie Dwyer] A couple of new popular books have recently been published such as *Weapons of Mass Deception* and *Stupid White Men*. Do you see them as a viable alternative to the corporate media?

[Noam Chomsky] No, they are not trying to be an alternative to the corporate media. They are just books among the many books written about the way the corporate media function and there is by now, in the United States, more than any other western country that I know, a rather significant popular movement concerned with the corporate media, which is virtually all the media within the United States, and the way they function as a kind of propaganda system.

There is also a lot of popular protest against efforts to increase the concentration of the media in fewer and fewer hands so as to prevent even the limited diversity that exists. The books that you mention are just two of the many. The books themselves, the critical literature - I've written on it too- aren't an alternative to the corporate media but rather a part of an on-going effort to construct alternatives or to compel them to function in a more honest fashion.

[Bernie Dwyer] The recent war on Iraq and the current US occupation was fully supported by the mainstream press in the US to the extent that the media became the political wing of the Bush administration. Isn't that pushing the power of the press beyond all limits?

[Noam Chomsky] It's hard to answer that. An independent press, of course, would not function in that fashion. You are quite right. The press became essentially an instrument of state policy, but there is nothing new about that. That happens during just about every military conflict and in fact during any general confrontation. The press tends overwhelmingly to function within the framework of state-corporate policy and those are very closely linked.

During the Vietnam War, which went on for years remember, the press was almost entirely supportive of the war. Toward the end, when it started getting costly to the United States and the business world then you started getting timid criticisms about how it was going to cost us too much and so on and you'll find that criticism now too: it's costing us too much. This goes back as far as you would like. The First World War was the same. And it's pretty much true in other countries too.

The mass media, the business world, and the intellectual community in general, tend to line up in support of concentrated power - which in the US is state and corporate power. And the same is true on the issues of Cuba. For example almost nobody knows the history of US terrorism in Cuba since 1959. Terrorism is a big word. Everybody talks about it. You wouldn't find a person in a thousand or maybe a hundred thousand who is aware of the fact

that the Kennedy administration intensified the on-going terrorist operations (against Cuba) and pressed them to such a point that they almost led to a terminal nuclear war and then they went on for years after that. In fact they are still going on. Almost no one knows that. It's not covered.

[Bernie Dwyer] The US media has branded several nations as terrorist nation or as harbouring terrorists or as being perpetrators of terrorist attacks. Cuba has been pigeonholed as falling into one if not all of these categories when we know that Cuba has suffered more terrorist attacks against it than any other country. How serious do you take these accusations against Cuba? Is the drum beat getting louder?

[Noam Chomsky] Louder than when? Not louder than when Kennedy invaded Cuba and then launched Operation Mongoose leading right to the missile crisis which practically destroyed the world. But, yes, it's picking up. The fact that the United States can label other countries as terrorist states itself is quite remarkable because it not a secret that the United States is incontrovertibly a terrorist state.

The US is the only country in the world that has been condemned by the World Court for international terrorism. The words they used were: "unlawful use of force" in their war against Nicaragua. That's international terrorism. There were two Security Council resolutions supporting that judgement. The US of course vetoed them. And that was no small terrorist war. It practically destroyed the country. US terrorism against Cuba has been going on since 1959 and the fact that the US can label Cuba a terrorist state when it has been carrying out a major terrorist campaign against Cuba since 1959, picking up heavily in the '60s and peaking in the '70s in fact, that's pretty astonishing.

But I think if you do a careful study of the American media and intellectual journals and intellectual opinions and so on, you will find nothing about this and not a word suggesting that there is anything strange about it. And if you look at the scholarly literature on terrorism by people like Walter Laqueur and other respected scholars, and take a look at the index, you find Cuba mentioned often and if you look at the page references, what is mentioned is suspicions that Cuba may have been involved in some terrorist actions, but what you will not find is a reference to the very well documented US terrorist operations against Cuba.

And that is not controversial. We have reams of declassified government documents on it. There is extensive scholarship on it, but it cannot enter into public discourse. It's a pretty remarkable achievement, not just of the media but of the intellectual community altogether. It's not very different in Europe. If you did an investigation in England you would probably find pretty much the same.

[Bernie Dwyer] The US and the people of the US have nothing to fear from Cuba. Cuba is not a threat. So why is the government doing such a closed job on Cuba?

[Noam Chomsky] The United States, to its credit, is a very free country, maybe the freest country in the world in many respects. One result of that is that we have extremely rich internal documentation. We have a rich record of high level planning documents which tell us the answer to your question. And that's an achievement of American democracy. However, almost nobody knows about it and that is a failure of democracy.

So the information is there. It's in the scholarly literature. It's in the declassified record and it answers your question very clearly. So when the

Kennedy administration took over, for example, it immediately organised a Latin American mission. Latin America was going to be a centre piece of the Kennedy administration policy. It was headed by a well-known American historian, Arthur Schlesinger, who was adviser to the president. Schlesinger's report of the Latin American mission has been declassified for the last number of years and the mission explains to Kennedy the importance of overthrowing the government of Cuba.

The reason is that they are concerned about, virtually quoting, the spread of the Castro idea of taking matters into one's own hands which will have a lot of appeal to suffering and impoverished people around the hemisphere who are facing very similar problems. We don't want that idea to spread. If you go on in the declassified records, you find descriptions by the CIA and the intelligence agencies of how the problem with Cuba is what they call its successful defiance of US policies going back a hundred and fifty years. That's a reference to the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine, which the US was not powerful enough to implement at the time, stated that the US would become the dominant force in this hemisphere and Cuba is not submitting to that. That is successful defiance of a policy that goes back a hundred and fifty years and that can't be tolerated. They make it very clear. They are not worried about Cuban aggression or even subversion or anything. They are worried about Cuba's successful defiance and that's not just Cuban. That's common.

When the US overthrew the government of Guatemala in 1954 - again we have that rich record of declassified documents - what they explain is that the threat of Guatemala was that its the first democratic government had enormous popular support. It was mobilising the peasantry, instituting social reforms and this was likely to appeal to surrounding countries that might want to do the same thing. And that couldn't be tolerated or else the whole framework of US domination of the hemisphere would collapse.

And it was the same in South East Asia and the rest of the world. The threat of independent nationalism has always been a primary threat. And actually if you go back far enough, remember the American colonies when they liberated themselves from England, they were regarded by European statesmen as a tremendous threat. The Czar, Metternich and others were extremely upset by this threat of republicanism which might appeal to others and undermine the conservative world order and its moral foundations. It's the kind of thing that you can't really accept. It's basically the threat of independence, of taking matters into your own hands, that can't be accepted. And anyone who wants to know about this can find it out.

As I say, it's a very free country. We have a rich documentary record of high level planning going way back and it's constantly the same thing. I mean why did the United States, Britain and France support Mussolini and Hitler as they did? Well, because they were afraid of what they called the masses in Italy and Germany. If the masses, inspired by the Soviet Union, might try to take matters into their own hands and threaten the rights of property and power, and the only people who can stop them are Hitler and Mussolini, then that's why they supported them almost to the day that the war began. These are old policies and they're understandable. They're understandable if you want the world to be subordinated primarily to domestic power interests.

[Bernie Dwyer] Because of 43 years of non-stop aggression Cuba has obviously had to take matters into their its own hands even though they did appeal to the United States to stop some of this terrorism emanating from the right-wing anti-Cuba groups in Miami. Are you familiar with the case of the five Cuban political prisoners in the US who were incarcerated for fighting against terrorism?

[Noam Chomsky] That's an amazing case! Cuba approached the United States with an offer to cooperate in combating terrorism and, in fact, the FBI sent people to Cuba to get information from the Cubans about it. The next thing was that Cubans who had infiltrated the terrorist groups in the United States were arrested. That is utterly shocking! Do you think it's reported? Nobody knows about it. I mean, here are Cubans who are infiltrating illegal, terrorist organisations in the United States, which are violating US law and the *infiltrators* are arrested, not the terrorists. It's astonishing. The US has refused intelligence cooperation with Cuba on terrorism because it would lead directly back to terrorist groups based in the United States.

Actually, since the 1970s, the United States has at least officially opposed this US-based terrorism. But it still tolerates it - it doesn't close down the terrorist bases or the terrorist funding - but theoretically it opposes it and in fact has even occasionally prosecuted people. Up until then (the 1970s) the US wasn't relying on Cuban exiles. It was itself organising the terrorism. That's right into the 1970s officially. What is going on now, we don't know. We know the official record up until 20 or 30 years ago.

[Bernie Dwyer] How are you following the case of the five Cubans considering the media silence surrounding the case?

[Noam Chomsky] There are, fortunately, independent sources although I can't think of an article in the United States. The British press has covered it. There are several independent alternative journals in the United States that have covered it. There was quite a good article on it by William Blum in *Counterpunch*. There's a good quarterly journal called *Socialism and Democracy* which published the testimonies of the Cuban prisoners. You can find material on some of the Internet sites like *Z-net*. So, it is possible for people to find out about it, but it's a research project. An ordinary person cannot be expected to do that. It's a major research project.

[Bernie Dwyer] The US obsession with overthrowing the Cuban Revolution reached new heights when James Cason became chief at the US Interests Section here in Havana. He deliberately set out to subvert the Cuban social project from the inside by recruiting, for money and favours, Cubans who would act as agents for the US. When the Cuban government reacted by arresting, putting on trial and imprisoning those mercenaries, there was a lot of criticism from many of Cuba's friends.

[Noam Chomsky] Yes, I have criticized them for that. I think it was a mistake. In the case of the petition I signed we insisted that it emphasised US terrorist actions and any illegal economic warfare going on against Cuba since 1959. It went on to say that in case of the people that were imprisoned, no public information had been available - and it still isn't - to justify the charge that they are US government agents, not critical dissidents. I mean the fact that they met with Cason, I may be wrong, but it doesn't prove it. I think it was the wrong thing to do and not very wise. It was just a gift to the harshest elements in the United States.

[Bernie Dwyer] You would still uphold your admiration of the Cuban system as you did before?

[Noam Chomsky] As far as I am concerned, I do not pass judgement on what Cubans decide to do. I am in favour of Cuba's successful defiance of the United States. I am in favour of them taking matters into their own hands. Exactly how they carry it out... I have my own opinions. A lot of things I think are fine, a lot not, but it's a matter for the Cubans to decide. My concern is that the hemispheric superpower not resort to violence,

pressure, force, threat, and embargo in order to prevent Cubans from deciding how to determine their own fate.

[Bernie Dwyer] There seems to be a move forward in Latin America with Chavez, Lula and Kirchner. Are you feeling optimistic for the future of Latin America?

[Noam Chomsky] There certainly are opportunities. What happened in Brazil is quite dramatic. It's a real lesson for the industrial democracies. Brazil taught a lesson to the industrial democracies that they ought to learn. There was an achievement of democracy in Brazil which has not been equalled in any of the rich industrial democracies. Popular forces based in the working class, in the peasantry, human rights organisations and others actually succeeded in electing their own president - a quite marvellous person, I think - over tremendous odds.

That doesn't happen in the western countries. It can't happen in the United States for example. But how far that can go is a difficult question. Forty years ago when Brazil had a moderately populist president - nothing like Lula, but at least moderately populist - the Kennedy administration just organised a military coup which overthrew him. It was one of the actions that set off a major plague of repression throughout the hemisphere. They are not doing it this time even though Lula is a far more significant figure than Goulart was and has much more popular support. They are not doing it for a number of reasons. One of them is that the international economic arrangement that has been imposed in the last 20 or 30 years in neo-liberal structures creates a stranglehold which prevents democracy from functioning. The main purpose, I believe, of the main neo-liberal measures is to reduce the options for democratic choice.

Now whether Brazil and others in the region will be able to combat this is a serious question and it certainly will require a very high degree of North/South solidarity for them to break out of this network of controls that has been designed to prevent people from making democratic choices without military coups.