

An Interview with Noam Chomsky

## Democracy and the Public University

*Rebecca Schein is Assistant Professor and Acting Coordinator of the Human Rights stream at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her teaching and research interests include: nationalism and cosmopolitanism; citizenship and civic pedagogies; social movements; social and economic rights; science studies. Research projects include: a critical cultural study of the U.S. Peace Corps and American cosmopolitanism; an examination of “risk management”, data ownership, and contemporary ideals of competent citizenship. Noam Chomsky is a political theorist and activist, and Institute Professor Emeritus of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Massachusetts, U.S.A). In addition to his work in linguistics, Chomsky has written widely on U.S. foreign and domestic policy, power and ideology, as well as the corporate media. Having authored more than 100 books, his most recent include: Profit Over People, Rogue States, The Essential Chomsky, and Power and Terror. Noam Chomsky was interviewed by Rebecca Schein at Carleton University on April 8, 2011.<sup>1</sup>*

**Rebecca Schein (RS):** The title of this discussion was “Democracy and the Public university” and I thought I would start with a really big question which is what do we mean when we talk about a public university? What is it that makes a public university?

**Noam Chomsky (NC):** Well there’s a technical definition. This depends on who is in charge of the administration, the finances and so on. It’s either the government or the private institution. If it’s the government it’s a public university, if it’s a private institution it’s a private university. Actually that’s just technical—the boundaries are extremely flexible. Take my own university, MIT. Technically it’s a private university, but it’s overwhelmingly subsidized by the government. In fact when I got there in 1955 and up through the early 1970s probably ninety percent of the academic program was paid by the Pentagon.

The political science department was openly funded by the CIA until the early 60s, when it got kind of embarrassing. After that some other technique was used and since then the funding has shifted for interesting reasons having to do with the nature of the economy. So

---

1 Interview transcribed by Kate Gentle. A recording of this interview is available at: <http://www1.carleton.ca/iis/news/noam-chomsky/>

technically, MIT is private but from another point of view it's public. The administration is private and the trustees are not specifically responsible to state authorities. On the other hand, if you go down the street to the University of Massachusetts it's entirely public and also gets some funding from the Federal Government. Harvard has the biggest private endowment in the world. It's a private University but again there is plenty of government funded work going on.

**RS:** Most of us are probably not imagining a time of Pentagon funding or its equivalent when we talk about the need to defend or restore the public-ness of our universities, nor would most of us be likely to see Pentagon funding as supportive of a democratic mission for universities. What is the relationship between democracy and a university's public-ness?

**NC:** You just can't draw mechanical conclusions about how research will be carried out from the source of the funding. A lot of my friends on the Left think that if you are Pentagon funded you must be working for the military. It's exactly the opposite. When you were Pentagon funded they didn't care what you did. If you wanted to overthrow the government in your spare time that's ok. In 1968, when MIT was completely Pentagon funded, I was in a lab that was one-hundred percent funded by the three armed services. That lab was also the centre of anti-war resistance in the country. Several of us, including me, were on the verge of long jail sentences. That was all under Pentagon funding and there was no interference. For twenty-five years I was teaching undergraduate courses in social and political issues and social change. They were open to the community and usually met in the evening. I was doing them in my own time but the University didn't shut them down. A lot of the students who came out were involved in the activism of the 60s. Some of the former students are doing things right now. As I say, it was the centre of anti-war resistance but there was no interference. There was a little harassment of the courses from the FBI but not from the Pentagon.

Interestingly, it was the increase in corporate funding through the later period that led to greater secrecy. In 1969, there was a period of a lot of student activism [at MIT]. There were protests about military labs, which were administered by MIT, and it was reaching a crisis which nobody wanted. So everybody did what you do when there's a crisis—you establish a commission to look into it. I was on the commission which looked into institute financing. It turned out that about half the institute budget was administering

the military labs, and the other half was the academic budget. The military labs did classified secret military work, but that was kind of a joke too. Technically it was secret, but the academic side was open. Again a kind of porous distinction. Of the academic budget in 1969 maybe ninety percent was Pentagon funded. There was no war work except for the Political Science department. The Political Science department was involved in pacification programs in Vietnam, and naturally this was under the rubric of a peace research institute. They had secret seminars and things like that, which you're not supposed to have, but outside the Political Science department there was no dedicated war work.

The Pentagon was not funding war work—they were funding the high tech economy.

The Pentagon was a technique. They were deluding tax payers into providing funds for the future benefit of private corporations. The Pentagon funded advances in computing, the development of the internet, lasers—in fact the whole IT revolution that enabled the high tech economy. The funding for innovation and initiative comes in many ways through the state sector, and for business that's great. They wait around and eventually reap the profits of publicly resourced innovation. The tax payers pay them on the assumption that we're saving ourselves from the Russians or something like that. That's basically the system.

Through the 50's and the 60's the cutting edge of the economy was electronics-based, and the Pentagon was a good cover for that sort of research. Now the cutting edge of the economy is more biology based. So we see funding shift to other government institutes like the National Institutes of Health. The shift in the sources of government money largely reflects the direction of the economy is headed, just as it did in the 1950's and 60's around MIT and other research Universities. This happens all over the country. MIT is extreme but it is all over Stanford, North Carolina and so on. Around the research Universities you get small start ups. Those are faculty members who are using the government funded research and development to start up small businesses.

Back then they were electronics-based, and if they were successful they'd be bought up by Raytheon and I-Tech and other big high tech companies. Now if you go around the campus the start-ups are genetic engineering, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and the big buildings around are Novartis and all these guys who want to milk the research

development that is going on under government auspices in the University. That's the basis for a lot of the economy. This goes a long way back but it really took off after the Second World War—partly because of changes in the nature of science and technology. In the 1950's, when I was there, MIT was actually an engineering school: you went there if you wanted to build things. Now if you want to build a bridge or an electric circuit you go to Wentworth Institute or some other place. MIT is a science University—you study basic science and basic math and you take pretty much the same courses whether you're in aeronautical engineering or electrical engineering. The technology changes fast, so if the students learn the technology of today, they won't be able to get a job twenty years from now. Technology will be different. If they learn fundamental science they can grow with it. So everything changed. The same is true in the biological-based areas such as pharmaceuticals.

At the same time, we see an increase in corporate funding in universities, and that has to do not with changes in science and technology, but with changes in the way the economy is structured. There is more of an effort to build a business model for everything, and corporate funding is part of that picture. Corporate funding has an effect. For one thing it tends to drive research towards short term applied work. When the Pentagon or NIH is funding something, they're thinking about the long term health of the economy. When Merck is funding something, they want something for themselves, not their competitors, and they want it tomorrow. So you end up getting more short term applied research.

You also get secrecy for the first time. There was no secrecy under the Pentagon. They wanted to be as open as possible because it just impedes communication between scientists and engineers. In fact there was no security in the buildings. You could walk in twenty-four hours a day. A corporation may not be able to enforce secrecy, but it can make it clear that you're not going to get your contract renewed if something gets out.

So there's a coarsening effect, which you'd expect when a business model is imposed on research.

**RS:** So is it reasonable to think that *public* universities, specifically, have a democratic function? Can you spell out the relationship between publicness and democracy?

**NC:** Well you know, MIT was a private university which means you have to pay tuition to get in. The tuition is not exorbitant, but it's tuition. A public university is supposed to be free. Its supposed to be for the

public. That used to be the case. The University of Pennsylvania is an ivy league college, and when I went it was one hundred dollars. You could easily get a scholarship, which I did. Working students could get a scholarship. Now it's probably \$20,000, \$30,000 and the public universities have changed radically since the 1970's. I don't know about here in Canada. I'm talking about the United States. Let me give you a personal example.

A couple of months ago I happened to be giving talks in Mexico City at the National University. It's a big university—it has a couple of hundred thousand students, pretty high quality, good facilities, smart students, good faculty, low salaries by our standards but quite an efficient, good university. A perfectly respectable university. It's free. Ten years ago the government tried to slightly raise tuition. There was a national student strike and the government backed off. In fact one of the main administration buildings on campus, I discovered, is still occupied by students from that strike and it has become kind of a movement centre, a community activities centre. The administration doesn't like it. A lot of the students don't like it, but they're not calling in the police to throw them out. In Mexico City there is a public university that is not only free but open admissions, so it's open to everyone. They have compensatory courses because a lot of the students don't have the right background. I was there, met students, talked to faculty. It was pretty impressive. Mexico is a very poor country, and I went from there to California, which is maybe the richest place in the world. In California they are consciously destroying the best public education system in the world.

The California public education system was pretty amazing. The universities were great universities. There's lower tiers like state colleges, lower colleges, other universities, all quite high level, and they used to be free. Tuitions have gone sky high. In fact it's very likely that Berkeley and UCLA, the two stars in the system, will be privatized. They're almost private universities now if you look at the tuition and the endowments. The rest of the system will be lowered in quality—more vocationally oriented and less funding. That's one of the richest places in the world. In fact this year for the first time I think less than half of the cost of the university is provided by public funding. Mostly it's tuition. That's true in many states in the United States now.

These are all steps towards privatizing society and creating a kind of two-tiered society—these are big processes, happening not just in universities. None of this is economically driven. You can

see that by comparing Mexico to the United States. Mexico is a very poor country. The United States is the richest country in history. So it's not economic. These are social decisions both in Mexico and in the United States. What's a public university supposed to be? Like Mexico. It should be free, there should be an option for open admissions, and resources should go into it to making sure it works. It is not impossible.

**RS:** Rising tuition fees, increasing reliance on student fees for operating budgets, endowments—to what extent do you see all these trends as part of a general divestment from the public sphere?

**NC:** Its partly general, but I think some of this is oriented specifically toward the universities. This hasn't really been studied so I'm just telling you what I think. All of this stuff began in the 70's. There were a lot of changes in the economy in the 70's, but one crucial thing changed with regard to the universities. The late 60's was a period of a lot of activism and it terrified the business world and it also terrified liberal intellectuals across the spectrum. They were terrified. "The students are out of control, there's too much democracy, what are we going to do?" There's some very interesting reactions that you can read. There are two main ones at the opposite ends of the spectrum and they're worth looking up. One of them is a book and the other you can find on the internet.

At the right end of the spectrum, we have the Powell Memo. Lewis Powell, was a corporate lawyer who became a Justice of the Supreme Court, and he wrote a memorandum to the education committee of the Chamber of Commerce in 1971. His memorandum was essentially reflected the paranoia of the business world. The business world is basically totalitarian. They're used to running everything, and if anything gets out of control the world is falling apart. That's a typical aspect of the totalitarian mentality. It shows up in foreign policy and all over the place. So his perspective was that the whole university system, as well as the media, television, and even the government, had been taken over by raging Marxist lunatics.

All of this is so surreal if you know anything about the facts. You'd laugh if you didn't understand that this is a natural perception of the totalitarian mentality. You can't allow anything to get out of control, and its true, things were partially out of control. So Herbert Marcuse was teaching some students in Harvard that Ralph Nader was popular, and to the business world that meant that all the world was falling apart. So Powell wrote to the Chamber of Commerce, the main business lobby, saying we've got to do something to "restore

the balance". Do something to make sure that in the universities, in television, in the media, there's at least some small voice that says the United States is not Nazi Germany and maybe something in American history is not just extermination and massacre. Powell says to the business world, look, we're the trustees of the universities, we're the ones who make the decisions, we provide the tax funds, and we own the media. We ought to mobilize instead of letting Ralph Nader and Herbert Marcuse steal the whole world away from us. We ought to mobilize and use our power to "restore the balance".

Powell's suggestions were followed by the business world in all kinds of ways, and I think one of them is raising tuitions. Its at that time that tuition starts to go up. That's a disciplinary technique. Kids in the 60's assumed, "I can take off for a couple of years and become a political activist and work for women's rights or civil rights, then I can come back and pick up my career." That's a dangerous situation—it frees people to think and that's a terrible idea.

So what you want to do is trap them. Maybe some guy thinks that he wants to be a public interest lawyer. If you make sure he comes out of law school \$100,000 in debt, he's going to go into a corporate law firm because he just has no choice. Once he's in there he'll internalize the culture and he'll be safe. It's the same across the board. Raising tuition is a disciplinary technique.

So we have the Powell Memo on the right. On the other end of the spectrum, which is in a way even more interesting, there's an important book called *The Crisis of Democracy*. It comes out in 1974 and it's the first publication of the Trilateral Commission. (The Trilateral Commission brought together liberal Internationalists in the three major state capitalist societies—North America, Western Europe, Japan. To get the tenor of it that's what the Carter administration was drawn from.)

Well what's *The crisis of Democracy*? The crisis of democracy is that there's too much democracy. Segments of the population that are usually passive and apathetic and obedient are entering the public arena and pressing their demands—women, youth, the elderly, workers and farmers. The population, in other words, or what they call the special interests. And that's too much pressure on the state. They can't deal with all the special interests. They have to be beaten back to establish what they called more moderation in democracy.

With regard to the schools it was quite interesting. They said that the institutions that are responsible for the indoctrination of

the young are not doing their job. Schools, universities, churches—they're not indoctrinating the young properly." (This is the liberals that I'm talking about!) "We've got to do something to make sure they indoctrinate the young properly." Then comes various suggestions. They even wanted to control the media, because they're too adversarial and free. Well the two ends of the political spectrum are almost identical and that tells you something. My strong suspicion is that the attacks on public universities, including things like tuition, quite possibly came out of this whole sort of mentality.

It was related to things happening in the economy. This is the period in the 1970s when the postwar economy was being dismantled—we see moves towards financialization and the off shoring of production. A lot of things happened. This was one of them. They tried to re-impose discipline so we wouldn't have problems from these students, who aren't indoctrinated properly. I think there was a confluence of all these things and it's led to the period of increasing repression which we're living under in the schools and everywhere else.

There is a cultural dimension to the transition happening in the economy—the fear of student independence and the fear of freedom. Freedom is a scary thing so you want to make sure people are properly indoctrinated and controlled. You have a lot of debt and not a lot of choices, you're insecure—you can't take chances. In fact if you listen to Alan Greenspan's testimony to Congress every year, he's crowing about the wonderful economy he's administering, and he says straight out its best feature is what he calls "growing worker insecurity." That's the best feature of the economy and that makes sense on his assumptions.

Growing worker insecurity means that working people are afraid to ask for a raise in wages, decent working conditions, for secure jobs and so on. They'll just grab on to anything they can, and that's great. It makes the economy more healthy by standard economic principles. So yes, growing worker insecurity is a great thing and it's the same with students. If they're insecure they're not going to go out onto the streets and demand things, and think about things. My feeling is that all of this is tied together very closely.

**RS:** So if students are disciplined by things like rising student debt and rising student fees, you could also argue that the people who are in charge of indoctrinating those students are also disciplined by this casualization of the labour force.

**NC:** That's right because you have to discipline both students and teachers. When the Trilateral Commission goes after the institutions

responsible for the indoctrination for the young, they're saying it's the teachers, the ministers, church figures, the people in charge are out of control. They're out of control so they have to be disciplined. And it's called casualization of the labour force, or cut backs, threats to tenure, and so on. That is disciplining the faculty. Academic freedom always had two aspects. The freedom to teach and the freedom to learn and you've got to cut them both back if you want to really control people.

**RS:** I think that you have said that you are uneasy about the notion of a politically engaged university, but that you also think that universities have a responsibility to foster political engagement. Could you say more about that?

**NC:** Well take MIT. I didn't think myself that MIT ought to become involved in the anti-war movement. It's not their job. Nor did I think they should become involved in the war. If they're going to develop technology for the military they ought to also be developing technology for guerilla resistance. But in fact they should be doing neither.

However, the university should be an open arena for people to get involved, and as I said, MIT was at the centre of academic anti-war resistance. I think it was 1968 that the whole university was closed down for a couple of weeks. A small number of students, including Mike Albert (who now runs Z-Net), Steve Shallow, and a few others decided to organize a sanctuary for deserters. That was the kind of thing going on then, mostly in churches. A kid decides he wants to desert, so you organize a sort of sanctuary and people stay with him until the FBI comes and takes him.

I should say I was against it. I thought this was just going to crash but their intuition was much better. The deserter was a very interesting young guy from the marines. He knew what he was doing—he had had a lot of briefing, thought about it, knew the consequences, and he wanted to do it. They had a press conference in a room in the student centre and about five people showed up. In about three days the whole institute was closed down. There were thousands of students in the student centre twenty-four hours a day doing everything that students do—everything from smoking pot to having seminars.

It was quite exciting. There were two weeks of really active engagement on campus and the institute was virtually closed. A lot of things came out of that experience. One thing that came out of it was the commission I was talking about earlier. Another was that

the institute itself officially devoted a full day just to consider the uses of technology in society. This is the main technological institute in the world and the question had never come up. So it was March 4th 1969. The day was set aside for meetings, discussions, rallies, all sorts of things on the uses of technology in society. One thing that came out of that day was the Union of Concerned Scientists, which is still around and very active. The whole culture of the place changed, and it's never going back to what it was. It's not as active as it was back in 68 but it's just a changed place.

This is the kind of thing the university ought to be open to. It's right for the university to concern itself with the uses of technology in society; it should be open to letting these issues be discussed and debated. The discussion that happened at MIT had a very good impact broadly over all kinds of subjects.

One of the biggest issues in Toronto is the School of Public Affairs that is being endowed by Peter Munk, who is the head of Barrick Gold, a big gold mining company. What should be done? Mining is an absolute international scandal, extremely destructive. It's environmentally destructive, it's destructive of communities all over the place and Canada has the worst record in the world for this. Gold mining is absolutely the worst. So I think that what Monk and the Global Affairs Institute ought to do is investigate mining—gold mining in particular. And don't just investigate, but offer a voice for people who have no voice. You go down in the summer to visit remote and endangered communities in Colombia and they're trying to protect themselves from mining. They have no voice. Nobody's going to hear them but people here do have a voice and they can support them. That's a perfectly fine research and teaching engagement for a university, and out of it can come pretty good actions. I think you see things like that all over the place. You're not trapped by funders. They may want to carry out indoctrination of the young but it doesn't mean they have to succeed.