**American Socrates**

**<http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/american_socrates_20140615/>**

**Posted on Jun 15, 2014**

By Chris Hedges



*Noam Chomsky speaks to the media at a friend’s house in Amman, Jordan, in 2010. AP/Nader Daoud*

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—[Noam Chomsky](http://www.chomsky.info/bios/2001----.htm%20), whom I interviewed last Thursday at his office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has influenced intellectuals in the United States and abroad in incalculable ways. His explications of empire, mass propaganda, the hypocrisy and pliability of the liberal class and the failings of academics, as well as the way language is used as a mask by the power elite to prevent us from seeing reality, make him the most important intellectual in the country. The force of his intellect, which is combined with a ferocious independence, terrifies the corporate state—which is why the commercial media and much of the academic establishment treat him as a pariah. He is the [Socrates](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/%20) of our time.

We live in a bleak moment in human history. And Chomsky begins from this reality. He quoted the late [Ernst Mayr](http://home.honolulu.hawaii.edu/~pine/mayr.htm%20), a leading evolutionary biologist of the 20th century who argued that we probably will never encounter intelligent extraterrestrials because higher life forms render themselves extinct in a relatively short time.

“Mayr argued that the adaptive value of what is called ‘higher intelligence’ is very low,” Chomsky said. “Beetles and bacteria are much more adaptive than humans. We will find out if it is better to be smart than stupid. We may be a biological error, using the 100,000 years which Mayr gives [as] the [life expectancy of a species](http://www.chomsky.info/books/hegemony01.htm%20) to destroy ourselves and many other life forms on the planet.”

Climate change “may doom us all, and not in the distant future,” Chomsky said. “It may overwhelm everything. This is the first time in human history that we have the capacity to destroy the conditions for decent survival. It is already happening. Look at species destruction. It is estimated to be at about the level of 65 million years ago when an asteroid hit the earth, ended the period of the dinosaurs and wiped out a huge number of species. It is the same level today. And we are the asteroid. If anyone could see us from outer space they would be astonished. There are sectors of the global population trying to impede the global catastrophe. There are other sectors trying to accelerate it. Take a look at whom they are. Those who are trying to impede it are the ones we call backward, indigenous populations—the [First Nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Nations%20) in Canada, the aboriginals in Australia, the tribal people in India. Who is accelerating it? The most privileged, so-called advanced, educated populations of the world.”

If Mayr was right, we are at the tail end of a binge, accelerated by the Industrial Revolution, that is about to drive us over a cliff environmentally and economically. A looming breakdown, in Chomsky’s eyes, offers us opportunity as well as danger. He has warned repeatedly that if we are to adapt and survive we must overthrow the corporate power elite through mass movements and return power to autonomous collectives that are focused on sustaining communities rather than exploiting them. Appealing to the established institutions and mechanisms of power will not work.

“We can draw many very good lessons from the early period of the Industrial Revolution,” he said. “The Industrial Revolution took off right around here in eastern Massachusetts in the mid-19th century. This was a period when independent farmers were being driven into the industrial system. Men and women—women left the farms to be ‘factory girls’—bitterly resented it. This was also a period of a very free press, the freest in the history of the country. There were a wide variety of journals. When you read them they are pretty fascinating. The people driven into the industrial system regarded it as an attack on their personal dignity, on their rights as human beings. They were free human beings being forced into what they called ‘wage labor,’ which they regarded as not very different from chattel slavery. In fact this was such a popular mood it was a slogan of the Republican Party—‘The only difference between working for a wage and being a slave is that working for the wage is supposed to be temporary.’ ”

Chomsky said this shift, which forced agrarian workers off the land into the factories in urban centers, was accompanied by a destruction of culture. Laborers, he said, had once been part of the “high culture of the day.”

“I remember this as late as the 1930s with my own family,” he said. “This was being taken away from us. We were being forced to become something like slaves. They argued that if you were a journeyman, a craftsman, and you sell a product that you produce, then as a wage earner what you are doing is selling yourself. And this was deeply offensive. They condemned what they called ‘the new spirit of the age,’ ‘gaining wealth and forgetting all but self.’ This sounds familiar.”

It is this radical consciousness, which took root in the mid-19th century among farmers and many factory workers, that Chomsky says we must recover if we are to move forward as a society and a civilization. In the late 19th century farmers, especially in the Midwest, freed themselves from the bankers and capital markets by forming their own banks and co-operatives. They understood the danger of falling victim to a vicious debt peonage run by the capitalist class. The radical farmers made alliances with the [Knights of Labor](http://www.history.com/topics/knights-of-labor%20), which believed that those who worked in the mills should own them.

“By the 1890s workers were taking over towns and running them in eastern and western Pennsylvania, such as Homestead,” Chomsky said. “But they were crushed by force. It took some time. The final blow was [Woodrow Wilson’s Red Scare](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1343.html%20).”

“The idea should still be that of the Knights of Labor,” he said. “Those who work in the mills should own them. There is plenty of manufacturing going on. There will be more. Energy prices are going down in the United States because of the massive exploitation of fossil fuels, which is going to destroy our grandchildren. But under the capitalist morality the calculus is profits tomorrow outweigh the existence of your grandchildren. We are getting lower energy prices. They [business leaders] are enthusiastic that we can undercut manufacturing in Europe because we have lower energy prices. And we can undermine European efforts at developing sustainable energy.”

Chomsky hopes that those who work in the service industry and in manufacturing can organize to begin to take control of their workplaces. He notes that in the Rust Belt, including in states such as Ohio, there is a growth of worker-owned enterprises.

The rise of powerful populist movements in the early 20th century meant that the business class could no longer keep workers subjugated purely through violence. Business interests had to build systems of mass propaganda to control opinions and attitudes. The rise of the public relations industry, initiated by President Wilson’s [Committee on Public Information](http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/ww1.cpi.html%20) to instill a pro-war sentiment in the population, ushered in an era of not only permanent war but also permanent propaganda. Consumption was instilled as an inner compulsion. The cult of the self became paramount. And opinions and attitudes, as they are today, were crafted and shaped by the centers of power.

“A pacifist population was driven to become war-mongering fanatics,” Chomsky said. “It was this experience that led the power elite to discover that through effective propaganda they could, as [Walter Lippmann](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/342965/Walter-Lippmann%20) wrote, employ “a new art in democracy, manufacturing consent.’ ”

Democracy was eviscerated. Citizens became spectators rather than participants in power. The few intellectuals, including [Randolph Bourne](http://randolphbourne.org/), who maintained their independence and who refused to serve the power elite were pushed out of the mainstream, as Chomsky has been.

“Most of the intellectuals on all sides were passionately dedicated to the national cause,” Chomsky said of the First World War. “There were only a few fringe dissenters. Bertrand Russell went to jail. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were killed. Randolph Bourne was marginalized. Eugene Debs was in jail. They dared to question the magnificence of the war.”

This war hysteria has never ceased, moving seamlessly from a fear of the German Hun to a fear of communists to a fear of Islamic jihadists and terrorists.

“The public is frightened into believing we have to defend ourselves,” Chomsky said. “This is not entirely false. The military system generates forces that will be harmful to us. Take Obama’s terrorist drone campaign, the biggest terrorist campaign in history. This program generates potential terrorists faster than it destroys suspects. You can see it now in Iraq. Go back to the [Nuremburg judgments](http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007722%20). Aggression was defined as the supreme international crime. It differed from other war crimes in that it encompasses all the evil that follows. The U.S. and British invasion of Iraq is a textbook case of aggression. By the standards of Nuremberg they [the British and U.S. leaders] would all be hanged. And one of the crimes they committed was to ignite the Sunni and Shiite conflict.”

The conflict, which is now [enflaming the region](http://www.smh.com.au/world/call-to-arms-as-iraq-sinks-into-sectarian-violence-20140614-zs7r4.html), is “a U.S. crime if we believe the validity of the judgments against the Nazis. Robert Jackson, the chief prosecutor at the [Nuremberg] tribunal, addressed the tribunal. He pointed out that we were giving these defendants a poisoned chalice. He said that if we ever sipped from it we had to be treated the same way or else the whole thing is a farce.”

Today’s elite schools and universities inculcate into their students the worldview endorsed by the power elite. They train students to be deferential to authority. Chomsky calls education at most of these schools, including Harvard, a few blocks away from MIT, “a deep indoctrination system.”

“There is the understanding that there are certain things you do not say and do not think,” Chomsky said. “This is very broad among the educated classes. It is why they overwhelmingly support state power and state violence, with some qualifications. Obama is regarded as a critic of the invasion of Iraq. Why? Because he thought it was a strategic blunder. That puts him on the same moral level as a Nazi general who thought the [second front](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/germany-launches-operation-barbarossa--the-invasion-of-russia%20) was a strategic blunder. That’s what we call criticism.”

And yet, Chomsky does not discount a resurgent populism.

“In the 1920s the labor movement had been practically destroyed,” he said. “This had been a very militant labor movement. In the 1930s it changed, and it changed because of popular activism. There were circumstances [the Great Depression] that led to the opportunity to do something. We are living with that constantly. Take the last 30 years. For a majority of the population it has been stagnation or worse. It is not the deep Depression, but it is a semi-permanent depression for most of the population. There is plenty of kindling out there that can be lighted.”

Chomsky believes that the propaganda used to manufacture consent, even in the age of digital media, is losing its effectiveness as our reality bears less and less resemblance to the portrayal of reality by the organs of mass media. While state propaganda can still “drive the population into terror and fear and war hysteria, as we saw before the invasion of Iraq,” it is failing to maintain an unquestioned faith in the systems of power. Chomsky credits the Occupy movement, which he describes as a tactic, with “lighting a spark” and, most important, “breaking through the atomization of society.”

“There are all sorts of efforts to separate people from one another,” he said. “The ideal social unit [in the world of state propagandists] is you and your television screen. The Occupy actions brought that down for a large part of the population. People recognized that we could get together and do things for ourselves. We can have a common kitchen. We can have a place for public discourse. We can form our ideas. We can do something. This is an important attack on the core of the means by which the public is controlled. You are not just an individual trying to maximize consumption. You find there are other concerns in life. If those attitudes and associations can be sustained and move in new directions, that will be important.”