

Interview with Noam Chomsky: “Direct participation in creativity”

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The creation of something innovative and powerful in the midst of so much white noise. That is what we are proposing for Amauta. Imagine a magazine that gives space to the serious debate of the suffering, oppressions, doubts and hopes of whomever wants to participate. In today’s media driven world, we are bombarded with constant information, and yet we still feel uninformed. Knowledge is power, but we continue to feel powerless in our own lives. These frustrations and impotence that we feel are real. But where are they coming from and why can’t we confront them properly?

There is too much noise. They throw bombs of information at us from all sides that attack our bodies until we are paralyzed and unable to gain a deeper understanding from what is being said. Before, we believed everything they told us, and now, we don’t believe in anything. In the end, it has the same effect. We neither want to participate nor control our destinies, so we give power over our lives to politicians and corporations by means of voting (in the booth or the checkout line) Now, these people we have elected make the decisions and create the framework that structures our daily lives. If they make a bad decision, we can blame them and feel content and superior that we could have done it better. These powerful men and women are to blame, as the responsibility and capacity to destroy grows with the amount of power we give them, but we are at fault as well. We prefer to seek refuge in information spaces that are progressively smaller and increasingly closed off from any opinions which we do not share. Here in these comfortable spaces, we do not have to face any criticism because we find people who think like us. We preserve our individuality and variety in thinking, but at the end we become the same: people who cannot listen to each other and are incapable of realizing that they share similar realities; people who continue to drift away from each other because they can only listen to the noise of their own voice; people that keep being held back because we cannot take the necessary collective action to regain the power we have given away. Those who have control over our lives want us to stay isolated from each other so there is no possibility of radical change. That is why Amauta wants to open up a space where we can talk to each other and form a community where everyone can participate as equals. As we discover information that leads us to question our ideas and beliefs, we will develop a drive to act together so we can, at some moment, re-establish

control over our lives. Here, at this moment, in the simple act of talking with each other and opening ourselves up to understanding, we create our first act of resistance.

But to create such a space, we need to understand how and why current communication media contribute to contain and manipulate us. We obtain most of our information from these outlets. This influences our perceptions of reality, and thus our relationship to this world and the particular way we decide to act in it. For example, if the news we receive through mainstream media sources establishes that the only way we can save our economy, and thus ourselves, is to buy more, then we will tend to do just that. This is such a central part of our way of life that our social status, and our happiness, is determined by this ability to buy. Yet since we wholeheartedly believe in this doctrine of consumerism, we have exploited and abused our resources to a point of destruction that it is hard to go back from. We have undermined the needs of the environment, as well as our fellow human beings, for the sake of our personal quest for self-satisfaction. Media has perpetuated this idea far and wide because it is the “truth” that was allowed to go through the different filters of power to reverberate throughout society — thus becoming the only option that is realistic for our lives.

This is, in the majority of cases, our reality. But it doesn't have to be. It is simply what they have told us it is, and that is why we see the world in that way. To unmask the influences that dominate the infrastructure of our current media (and thus the truths that are allowed in our society) so we can confront and change them, we had the amazing opportunity to talk to a well-respected public intellectual and linguist who has studied the subject in depth: Noam Chomsky. Coauthor with Edward S. Herman of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, and author of works such as *Necessary Illusions and Propaganda and the Public Mind* (through interviews by David Barsamian), Chomsky demonstrates how mass media have been propaganda tools that filter “inadequate” thoughts, and therefore spread the prevailing ideas of those who, by economic and/or political circumstances, have the resources to hold social positions that give them access to amplify their voices, while the rest has the right (or duty) to listen to them. He does not believe that these dominant ideas are one and the same (there can be differences between state and corporate interests, for example), or that journalists are not trying to do their job honestly and with some independence, or that small powerful groups conspire to deceive and manipulate in large scales for their own benefit. He considers that these parameters of control that limit debate become established through a system based on the accumulation of goods and influence: those who have more money and more power are going to have better access to media to express their priorities and ideologies. They manage to do this simply because they have the resources to buy this space and restrict competition to those who consider dedicating information to commercial ends or who share “acceptable” values such as social order, conformance and unquestionable consumerism as our roles in life. This is how Chomsky explains it in our recent conversation:

“A lot of the people involved in the media are very serious, honest people, and they will tell you, and I think they are right, that they are not being forced to write anything... What they don't tell you, and are maybe unaware of, is that they are allowed to write freely because their beliefs conform to the ... standard doctrinal system, and then, yes, they are allowed to write freely and are not coerced. People who don't accept that doctrinal system, they may try to survive in the media, but they are unlikely to...”

The whole intellectual culture has a filtering system, start[ing] as a child in school. You're expected to accept certain beliefs, styles, behavioral patterns and so on. If you don't accept them, you are called maybe a behavioral problem, or something, and you're weeded out. Something like

that goes on all the way through universities and graduate schools. There is an implicit system of filtering...which creates a strong tendency to impose conformism. Now, it's a tendency, so you do have exceptions, and sometimes the exceptions are quite striking. Take, say, this university [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], in the 1960s, in the period of 60s activism, the university was about a hundred percent funded by the Pentagon. It was also, probably the main academic center of antiwar resistance [during the war in Vietnam]...

The tendencies are quite strong, and the rewards for conformity are quite high, and the punishments for nonconformity can be significant. It's not like we send you to a torture chamber,...[but] it can affect advancement, it can affect even employment, it can affect the way you're treated, you know, disparegement, dismissal, slander, denunciations."

But he insists that this filtering system has existed in all societies throughout history. The persecution of those who have questioned oppressive beliefs dictated by the authorities can be observed since ancient Greece and biblical times. This persecution continues because "sectors of power are not going to favor the flourishing of dissidence; the same reason why businesses won't advertise in La Jornada."

In the middle of September, Chomsky was one of the guests of honor for La Jornada's twenty-fifth anniversary, which he considers to be "the one independent newspaper in the whole hemisphere." He says that this Mexican daily's success surprises him not only because it survives without much advertising, but also because it deals with important subjects that are outside the limits of what is considered "acceptable" and yet continues to be one of the most popular mainstream news sources in the whole country. Normally, Chomsky thinks that the larger and more established media sources like the New York Times and CBS News "serve an extremely important function in supporting power" because their "liberalism" turns them into "the guardians of the gate" as they draw a line on what can be published and what cannot. "I think they're moderately critical at the fringes. They're not totally subordinate to power, but they are very strict in how far you can go," he said. He gives the example of the war against Vietnam: people in the mainstream media would not really question the government's intentions, since they mostly believed that the government was always trying "to do good." They might have criticized its plans, strategies and, just sometimes, denounced the abuses committed after its forces failed a mission or after the amount of people who had died couldn't be hidden anymore from the public, but not the underlying intent. They also called Obama a "liberal", Chomsky says, because he criticized the previous government for its "strategic blunder" and not so much because he thought that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan themselves are bad. At this time, after the announcement of a troop surge in Afghanistan, Chomsky showed he was right: Obama is a "liberal" not because he questions the war-driven intentions of this nation, but because he believes he can do it better.

Most media are labeled as "liberal" not because they really are, but because they are as far left as they can go in the political spectrum without making the people in power uncomfortable. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, only "29 percent of Americans say that news organizations generally get the facts straight", while twice as many of those surveyed said the press was liberal compared to those who said it was conservative. If the general public perception of mainstream media is of a deceptive liberal entity, then it follows that there would be a push to the right by many people. Right-wing talk show hosts have a "uniform" message that "reach a huge audience" because they address people's "real grievances", Chomsky asserts.

"Put yourself in the position of a person, sort of an ordinary American, 'I'm a hard-working, god-fearing Christian. I take care of my family, I go to church, I...do everything 'right'. And I'm

getting shafted. For the last thirty years, my income has stagnated, my working hours are going up, my benefits are going down. My wife has to work two [jobs] to...put food on the table. The children, God, there's no care for the children, the schools are rotten, and so on. What did I do wrong? I did everything you're supposed to do, but something's going wrong to me.' Now the talk show hosts have an answer..."

An atmosphere of mistrust towards so called 'liberal' media allows for extreme right outlets to exploit the genuine grief of those affected by politicians' fake promises, medias' lies and corporations' frauds. These people mistrust media because they have been painted a life that does not exist in their horizon since their reality is something else: much harsher but sanitized so those who actually do have power to change these circumstances can swallow the story that this current system works perfectly. For those in sectors of power, capitalism has worked and has been wonderful, and since that is their reality, that is what they are going to believe and preach. And because they have control of the devices to make themselves be heard far and wide, this is the only noise that really stands out from the rest. For many, including himself, Chomsky acknowledges, "people at our income level are doing fine. Like, there's complaints about health care, yeah. I get terrific health care... Our health care is rationed by wealth, and [for certain people] it is fine. But not for the people who are listening to the talk shows, and that's a large part of the population." So these outlets manage, from the simple act of admitting that problems exist, to turn into a powerful voice that defends those who have been pushed into the sidelines of society. In this way, ironically, they then accumulate their own power and money by marketing their listeners' support and trust. While they become rich, they offer false populist solutions that direct the people's rightful rage against "immigrants" or "socialists" or "feminists" that supposedly have the government under control. By creating fights between groups with similar problems, right wing media manages to distract people from the fact that they themselves (these so-called advocates) also profit from the current system. They are able to continue to promote a world where their ideas, those of rich white men, is supreme law. In other words, what this actually accomplishes is to reinforce the existing system and exclude more people than before from the little benefits the system provides. But these contradictions easily get lost in their shouts, drowning everything in the noise of fear and rage.

How can we face and resist easy ideas that end up misleading us and obstruct genuine change? Can it be done? Has it been done?

"[These patterns have] been broken to an extent. So we don't live in tyrannies — the king doesn't decide what's legitimate, and there's much more freedom than there was in the past. So yes, these patterns can be modified. But as long as you have concentration of power in one form or another, whether it's arms, or capital or something else, when you have concentration of power, these are consequences that you almost automatically expect."

Chomsky notes he found some frustration within leftist intellectuals in his recent visit to Mexico because they feel "there's a lot of popular... concern and activism, but it is very fragmented. That the groups have very specific, narrow agendas and they don't interact and cooperate with one another. Ok, that's something you have to overcome to build a mass popular movement. And... media can help, but they also benefit from it, so... unless that happens, unless you get kind of an integration of activists' concerns and movements... each one will be 'preaching to the choir'... It takes organization. Organization and education, when they interact with each other, they strengthen each other, they are mutually supportive."

Amauta would like to facilitate the creation of this coordinated popular movement. We will create a space where different people and groups could discuss, no matter what ideology, our communities' troubles with sincerity. At the same time, we would remain conscious of the importance of not allowing Amauta to become an instrument for propaganda or self-interest. Here, perhaps, we could become masters of our own voices, and our word would be worth more than that of the politician on television, and our conversation would reveal more than any information we obtain from current mass media. Most importantly, we would like to expand our conversation until it reaches every possible corner so that we can all collaborate to form a movement or many movements that disrupt and transform the current state of affairs in our world. As Chomsky wrote in his book, *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, "a movement of the left has no chance of success, and deserves none, unless it can develop an understanding of contemporary society and a vision of a future social order that is persuasive to a large majority of the population. Its goals and organizational forms must take shape through their active participation in popular struggle and social reconstruction. A genuine radical culture can be created only through the spiritual transformation of great masses of people, the essential feature of any social revolution that is to extend the possibilities for human creativity and freedom."

To reclaim our voice and become artists, journalists, creators of our own truths and instigators of change, Chomsky gave us a practical example of what he considers "direct participation in creativity." He describes how more or less fifteen years ago in Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in those times a labor unionist not yet president, took him to a poor neighborhood outside Rio de Janeiro where there was an open space: a town square. "It's a semi-tropical country, everybody's outside, it's in the evening. A small group of journalists from Rio, professionals, come out in the evening with a truck, park it in the middle of the plaza. It has a screen above it. And broadcasting equipment. And what they're broadcasting [are] skits, written by people in the community, acted and directed by people in the community. So local people are presenting the skits. One of the actresses, girl, maybe seventeen, was walking around the crowd with a microphone, asking people to comment — a lot of people were there, and they were interested, they were watching, you know, people sitting in the bars, people milling around in the space — so they commented on what they saw, and what they said was broadcasted, you know, there was a television screen behind, so they displayed what the person said, and then other people commented on that. And the skits were significant [...], there were about serious... some of them were comedy, you know. But some of it was [...] about the debt crisis, or about AIDS [...] It's direct participation in creativity. And it was a pretty imaginative thing to do, I think."

Now it is our turn. We want to be that town square, that public space where communities can gather to create something of paramount importance. We want to actively seek out more and more people to directly participate to incite a communal transformation, and perhaps one day, an authentic revolution. If you want to join us, welcome.

Interview transcript

Amauta: So I wanted to start the conversation with your recent trip to Latin America. I just heard you were in Latin America and you were in Mexico this Monday and this weekend. How was it? Just a general statement.

Chomsky: I was in Mexico City. It's a very pleasant city in many ways. It's vibrant, lively, pretty exciting society, but also depressing in other ways, and sometimes almost hopeless, you know. So it's a combination of vibrancy and, I wouldn't say despair, but hopelessness, you know. Doesn't have to be, but it is. I mean, there is almost no economy.

Amauta: And you went there specifically for the anniversary of La Jornada?

Chomsky: La Jornada, which is, in my opinion, the one independent newspaper in the whole hemisphere.

Amauta: Yeah.

Chomsky: And amazingly successful. So it is now the second largest newspaper in Mexico, and very close to the first. It is completely boycotted by advertisers, so when you read it, I have a copy of it here, but if you just thumb through it, there is no ads. Not because they refuse them, but because business won't advertise. Though they have notices, you know, so announcements of a meeting, they have government notices. But that is only because the constitution requires it. But they are essentially boycotted. But nevertheless they survive and flourish.

Amauta: Why do you think there is success, why do you think it's successful?

Chomsky: I couldn't figure that out, and I am not sure they know. (Laugh). But it is amazingly successful, and of course, it is extremely unusual because all media depend on advertisement to survive. And it is also independent, I mean, I was only there four days, but I must have picked up half a dozen articles that don't appear in the international press, that are important.

Amauta: I'm going to make a general summary of some of your work. You say, Because media is a business, which has to create profits, it answers to the market demands and its investors more than to the integrity of the news. It constrains its contents to what is acceptable within the limits of capitalist ideology, promoting the capitalist agenda and values throughout society. It maintains social order, conformance and unquestionable consumerism as our roles in life. And as the corporations that control media conglomerate and have larger access to the market, they further limit information and debate to what is within the interests of even fewer powerful people.

Do you see media engaging in some sort of soft mind control, or would this be too strong of a statement?

Chomsky: Well, first of all, I think that is a bit too narrow because they also conform very stupendously to state interests, and that state system and the corporate system are close, but they are not identical. And also we have to recognize that there is a range of interests, like there isn't a single corporate interest and a single state interest, so there's a range. In addition to that, there is the fact of professional integrity. A lot of the people involved in the media are very serious, honest people, and they will tell you, and I think they are right, that they are not being forced to write anything...

Amauta: That they are objective.

Chomsky: ...not that they believe in. What they don't tell you, and are maybe unaware of, is that they are allowed to write freely because they conform, their beliefs conform to the generally, you know, to the standard doctrinal system, and then, yes, they are allowed to write freely and are not coerced. People who don't accept that doctrinal system, they may try to survive in the media, but they are unlikely to. So there's a range. But there is kind of a fundamental conformity, which is a virtual requirement to enter into the media. Now, you know, it's not a totalitarian society, so there's exceptions. You can find exceptions. Furthermore, the media are not very different from universities in this respect. So it's really, there's an effect of advertising, corporate ownership, the state, there's an effect. But this are really to a large extent current events now of an intellectual culture. You don't...

Amauta: So you think it's more like the values people hold influence this.

Chomsky: The whole intellectual culture has a filtering system, starts as a child in school. You're expected to accept certain beliefs, styles, behavioral patterns and so on. If you don't accept them,

you are called maybe a behavioral problem, or something, and you're weeded out. Something like that goes on all the way through universities and graduate schools. There is an implicit system of filtering, which has the, it creates a strong tendency to impose conformism. Now, it's a tendency, so you do have exceptions, and sometimes the exceptions are quite striking. Take, say, this university [MIT], in the 1960s, in the period of 60s activism, the university was about a hundred percent funded by the Pentagon. It was also, probably the main academic center of antiwar resistance.

Amata: Yeah, I saw a Lockheed Martin office downstairs.

Chomsky: Yeah, now there is a Lockheed Martin office. There wasn't at that time, it has become more corporate since. That's the military industry, but at that time it was straight Pentagon funding. In fact, I was in a lab that was a hundred percent funded by the Pentagon, and it was one of the centers of the organized antiwar resistance movement.

Amata: So you do say there is a window of opportunity for resistance?

Chomsky: There's a range of possibilities. It has limits, you know, and the tendencies are quite strong, and the rewards for conformity are quite high, and the punishments for nonconformity can be significant. It's not like we send you to a torture chamber.

Amata: (Laugh) More like lifestyle and how things limit you to certain...

Chomsky: It can be, it can affect advancement, it can affect even employment, it can affect the way you're treated, you know, disparagement, dismissal, slander, denunciations. There's a range of, it's true of every society.

Amata: So you think it's like engrained in our culture, kind of.

Chomsky: No, it's every society. I don't know of any society throughout history that's been unlike it.

Go back to classical times, say classical Greece. Who drank the hemlock? Was it someone who was conforming, obeying the gods? Or was it someone who was disrupting the youth and questioning the faith and belief? Socrates, in other words. It was Socrates. Or go back to the Bible, the Old Testament. I mean there were people who we would call intellectuals, there, they were called prophets, but they were basically intellectuals: they were people who were doing critical, geopolitical analysis, talking about the decisions of the king were going to lead to destruction; condemning immorality, calling for justice for widows and orphans. What we would call dissident intellectuals. Were they nicely treated? No, they were driven into the desert, they were imprisoned, they were denounced. They were intellectuals who conformed. Centuries later, let's say in the Gospels, they were called false prophets, but not at the time. They were the ones who were welcomed and well-treated at the time: the flatters of the court. And I don't know, I know of no society since that is different from that. There is variation of course, but that basic pattern persists, and it is completely understandable. I mean, sectors of power are not going to favor the flourishing of dissidence; the same reason why businesses won't advertise in *La Jornada*.

Amata: Do you think we could break that pattern?

Chomsky: It's been broken to an extent. So we don't live in tyrannies, you know, the king doesn't decide what's legitimate, and there's much more freedom than there was in the past. So yes, these patterns can be modified. But as long as you have concentration of power in one form or another, whether it's arms, or capital or something else, when you have concentration of power, these are consequences that you almost automatically expect.

As I say, there are exceptions. It's interesting to see the exceptions. So take your, or the West altogether. I know of only one country, at least to my knowledge, which has a dissident culture

where leading figures, I mean, the most famous writers, journalists, academics and so on, are not only critical of state policy, but are constantly carrying out civil disobedience and risking imprisonment and often being imprisoned, standing up for people's rights. That's Turkey.

In Western Europe, Turkey is regarded as uncivilized, so they can't come in into the European Union until they're civilized. I think it's the other way around. If you could achieve the level of civilization of, say, Turkish intellectuals, it would be quite an achievement.

Amata: You have written that if the public have their "own independent sources of information, the official line of the government and the corporate class would be doubted". According to a Pew Research Center study, only "29% of Americans say that news organizations generally get the facts straight", Yet "twice as many saying the press was liberal than conservative", which has lead to more divisions among people and distrust of each other..

Chomsky: Yeah, I would say the same thing. That I think the press, by and large, is what we call "liberal". But of course what we call "liberal" means well to the right. "Liberal" means the "guardians of the gates". So the New York Times is "liberal" by, what's called, the standards of political discourse, New York Times is liberal, CBS is liberal. I don't disagree. I think they're moderately critical at the fringes. They're not totally subordinate to power, but they are very strict in how far you can go. And in fact, their liberalism serves an extremely important function in supporting power. It's saying: "I'm guardian of the gates, you can go this far, but not further."

So take a major issue, like say, the invasion of Vietnam. Well, no liberal newspaper ever talked about the invasion of Vietnam; they talked about the defense of Vietnam. And then they were saying, "well, it's not going well." Ok, that make them liberal. It's like, it's if we were to say, that going back to, say, Nazi Germany, that Hitler's general staff was liberal after Stalingrad because they were criticizing his tactics: "It was a mistake to fight a two front war, we should've knocked off Englad first," or something. Ok, that's what we call liberalism, saying, "well it's not going well," you know, so, "maybe it's costing us too much" or you know some may say even "maybe we are killing too many people." But that's called "liberal." So take like, say, Obama, he's called "liberal" and he's praised for his "principled objection to the Iraq war". What was his "principled objection"? He says it was a "strategic blunder," like Nazi generals after Stalingrad. Ok, well...

Amata: Not the war itself, but...

Chomsky: Not that there was necessarily something wrong with it, but that it was a "strategic blunder": "we shouldn't have done it, we should have done some other thing" like "we shouldn't have fought a two front war" if you are on the German general staff. Or like, let's take Pravda in the 1980s. I mean you could have read things in Pravda saying that it was a stupid error to invade Afghanistan: "it was a dumb thing to do, we have to get out, it's costing us too much." I mean that U.S. analog of that would be "extreme liberalism," and it has been pretty well studied. Let's say the Vietnam war went on for a long time, we have a ton of material. What was called "the extreme critique of the war," let's say right at the war's end, you go too way, what's called the "far left" of the media, maybe Anthony Lewis and the New York Times, outspoken, liberal, the "extreme". He summed up the war in 1975 by saying the U.S. entered South Vietnam with, I think his phrase was, "blundering efforts to do good." "To do good" is tautological. Our government did it so therefore by definition of what's "to do good" and try to give evidence to that, he doesn't because it's a tautology, it's like saying two plus two equals four. So we enter, and blundering, yeah, it didn't work out, well. So we enter with "blundering efforts to do good," but by 1969, it was becoming clear that it was a disaster too costly to ourselves. We could not bring democracy and freedom to Vietnam at a cost acceptable to ourselves. The idea that that was what we were

trying to do, is again, a tautology, it's true by definition because we were doing, and the state is noble by definition. That's called "extreme liberalism".

Amata: So you are saying that papers like the New York Times are...

Chomsky: They are liberal.

Amata: ...the liberal side for the general public.

Chomsky: They're liberal by our standards, by the conventional standards of liberalism.

Amata: That means that if twice as many people are saying these are too liberal...

Chomsky: They are right. They are right. But that's not what they mean. See, that's not what the people mean who are answering the question. That's why I would agree with them, but with a different interpretation. I'm saying what's called "liberal" in the intellectual culture means highly conformist to power, but mildly critical. Like, say, Pravda in the 1980s, or the German general staff after Stalingrad. Highly conformist to power, but critical, maybe even sharply critical. Because it's making a mistake, or it's costing us too much, or it's the wrong thing to do, or something. Yeah, that's liberal, that's what we call liberal. But when the people are answering that question, they mean something else. What they mean probably, you know, the polls don't really inquire, so we don't know, but guessing, my guess would be what they mean is, they are referring to their lifestyle choices. So like they accept abortion, they are not religious, you know, they live more or less free lifestyle, not the traditional families, they believe in gay rights, and so on. What the polls don't tell you is, though other polls do, is that if you do a study of CEOs, top executives in corporations, they're liberal. Their attitudes on these matters are about the same as the press.

Amata: Do you think...

Chomsky: And incidentally, if you listen to the talk shows, which are rabid right-wing, and very interesting, an important fact about the United States, they reach a huge audience. And they're very uniform. So right wing, I don't think you can even find an analog in your, but they reach a mass audience, and their view is that the corporations are liberal. Their appeal to the population is, "the country is run by liberals, they own the corporations, they run the government, they own the media, and they don't care about us ordinary people." And there's an analog to this: late Weimar republic, it's very reminiscent of the late Weimar republic. And this mass appeal has its similarities to Nazi propaganda. And... an important... and a lot of differences, but there's a very important sense in which it's similar: they are reaching out to a population of people with real grievances. The grievances are not invented. In the United States, in Weimar Germany...

Amata: That was my question, if these people distrust, they might have a healthy distrust of the media, but they can, you think, be manipulated by other extreme interests?

Chomsky: Well, I really suggest listening to talk radio. I mean, if you just listen to what the talk hosts are saying, they sound like they are lunatics.

Amata: And they have so much coverage in the media too.

Chomsky: But put aside your disbelief and just listen to it. Put yourself in the position of a person, sort of an ordinary American, "I'm a hard-working, god-fearing Christian. I take care of my family, I go to church, I, you know, do everything 'right'. And I'm getting shafted. For the last thirty years, my income has stagnated, my working hours are going up, my benefits are going down. My wife has to work two [jobs] to, you know, put food on the table. The children, God, there's no care for the children, the schools are rotten, and so on. What did I do wrong? I did everything you're supposed to do, but something's going wrong to me. Now, the talk show hosts have an answer, nobody has an answer, I mean, there is an answer.

Amata: Right, they address their grievances.

Chomsky: Well, the answer is, you know, the neoliberal remaking of the economy, among other things. But nobody is giving them that answer. Not the media certainly because they don't see it that way, they're doing fine. Like, say, Anthony Lewis again in the way left end describes the last thirty years as the golden age of, the golden age of American capitalism. Well, it was for him and his friends. And for me. You know, people at our income level are doing fine. Like, there's complaints about health care, yeah. I get terrific health care.

Amata: You work in the university.

[minor interruption, letting me know time of interview was running out]

Chomsky: Our health care is rationed by wealth. And the people Anthony Lewis meets for dinner in a restaurant, and his friends and so on, yeah, for them is fine. But not for the people who are listening to the talk shows, and that's a large part of the population. In fact, for the majority of the population, wages and incomes have stagnated and conditions have gotten worse. So they are asking, "what did I do wrong?" And the answer that the talk show host is giving them is convincing, in it's internal logic. It's saying, "what's wrong is the rich liberals own everything, run everything, they don't care about you; therefore, distrust them" and so on. What did Hitler say? He said the same thing. He said "it's the Jews, it's the Bolcheviks, that's a...

Amata: He was scapegoating.

Chomsky: ...that's an answer. Ok, it is an answer, internal to... and it has an internal logic, maybe insane, but it has an internal logic.

Amata: So, one last question. Going from there, and to counteract these, I guess, right-wing...

Chomsky: Populism. That's what it is.

Amata: ...Yeah, populism. You said that to build a movement, media should be involved in building a movement. This is my thing [paraphrasing]. But to build a movement, you need "broad-based appeal," a "genuine radical culture can be created only through the spiritual transformation of great masses of people, the essential feature of any social revolution that is to extend the possibilities of human creativity and freedom." How can alternative media like Amata push itself in building this "broad-based appeal" and go beyond just 'preaching to the choir'? Because I feel that a lot of our media like, like I read certain things, I read La Jornada, but, do people like me read La Jornada only? Or other people read La Jornada? They don't like to be challenged.

Chomsky: La Jornada is more widely read. Like you can go down the streets and see, somebody standing, sitting in a bar and reading it. But, you know, just media alone is not enough. You have to have organization. So take Mexico. I mean, I don't claim to know a lot about Mexico, but I did talk to quite a number of left Mexican intellectuals, and they all said the same thing. That there's a lot of popular, kind of, concern and activism, but it is very fragmented. That the groups have very specific, narrow agendas and they don't interact and cooperate with one another. Ok, that's something you have to overcome to build a mass popular movement. And that's, media can help, but they also benefit from it, so you're right, unless that happens, unless you get, you know, kind of integration of activists' concerns and movements, it will be, each one will be 'preaching to the choir'.

Amata: So you think we have to involve people, but getting active participation in this...

Chomsky: It takes organization. Organization and education, when they interact with each other, they strengthen each other, they are mutually supportive.

Amata: How do you envision having a network of people from all parts of society, but mostly the majority that needs to take their voice back, becoming experts themselves as citizen journalists or artists, while holding each other accountable in the news-making process?

Chomsky: A lot of ways to do it. I'll leave, but I will give you just one practical example, among many others. I was in Brazil, about fifteen years ago, and I traveled around at that time with Lula a lot. He was still not the president. He took me once to a big suburb outside of Rio de Janeiro, a couple of million people, poor suburb. And it has, kind of a big, you know, open space, kind of plaza outside. It's a semi-tropical country, everybody's outside, it's in the evening. A small group of journalists, from Rio, professionals, come out in the evening with a truck, park it in the middle of the plaza. It has a screen above it. And broadcasting equipment. And what they're broadcasting [are] skits, written by people in the community, acted and directed by people in the community. So local people are presenting the skits. One of the actresses, girl, maybe seventeen, was walking around the crowd with a microphone, asking people to comment — a lot of people were there, and they were interested, they were watching, you know, people sitting in the bars, people milling around in the space — so they commented on what they saw, and what they said was broadcasted, you know, there was a television screen behind, so they displayed what the person said, and then other people commented on that. And the skits were significant. You know, I don't know Portuguese, but I could follow them more or less.

Amata: So, you see this as an active participation in this movement?

Chomsky: Absolutely, there were about serious... some of them were comedy, you know. But some of it was, you know, about the debt crisis, or about AIDS...

Amata: But it allows a space for creativity, for people...

Chomsky: It's direct participation in creativity. And it was a pretty imaginative thing to do, I think. I don't know if it still goes on, but it's one of many possible models.

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