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Power and Powerlessness: An Interview with Noam Chomsky

MARK HARRIS: I think a lot of people would be interested to know your reaction to the recent Presidential election and the Supreme Court's decision to stop the vote recount in Florida. What do you think we should take away from all this, in terms of evaluating the vitality of our democracy?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, the Supreme Court decision was kind of scandalous. But most of the issues that received such enormous media attention after the election seemed to me largely irrelevant. The business about dimpled chads and the shape of the ballot and so forth were perhaps of some significance but only marginally so, compared to much more overwhelming factors. To mention one of them: The day after the election Human Rights Watch published a report on Florida in which they estimated that about 30 percent of the Black male population was excluded from voting simply by our outlandish criminal procedure system.

For one thing, since the Reagan years of the early 1980s, incarceration has gone way beyond the level of any comparable country. Maybe five to ten times as high. Twenty years ago it was approximately the same [as that in other "developed" countries]. The incarceration rate also increased significantly during the Clinton-Gore years, too, by almost 50 percent. In fact, about 600,000 more people went to jail during this period, reaching almost 2,000,000 incarcerated Americans by the end of the Clinton administration. It's an outlandish figure.

These trends, I should say, are also very sharply class focused. Class in the United States also means race, so class and race focused. Our legal system, unlike other industrial countries, prevents prisoners from voting and, in many states, including Florida, even prevents ex-felons from voting. That means forever. The irony is that since the Black population votes about 90 percent Democratic, the numbers alone of disenfranchised votes swung Florida and many other swing states. So, in a certain sense, Clinton-Gore's policies lost them the election, simply by disenfranchising one of their major voting blocs.

Now that's one important fact. But an even more important fact is what appears very strikingly in the analyses of voting patterns and voter attitudes, which have been studied

very carefully. Again, the United States is unlike most other industrial societies in several respects. One is that voting is very limited here, so only roughly half the population even bothers to vote. The second is that among those who do vote, voting is very highly class-skewed. Of course, in the United States we don't talk about class, the term used is "income-related" or something like that.

But it amounts to class-related and what we see in the United States is that voting is heavily skewed toward the wealthy and privileged. But perhaps the most crucial fact about the election was that a very large majority of the population just didn't think that there was any kind of real election altogether. There were some careful studies of voter attitudes, for example, showing that right through the end of the campaign, approximately 75 percent of the population considered the electoral campaign and the election to be some kind of game played by rich folk.

The election was perceived as having to do with rich contributors, corporations, party managers, and the public relations industry. The latter...was crafting candidates in such a way as to make them appealing to voters not on the basis of issues, but of what in the industry are called "qualities." So you're supposed to focus on whether this is the kind of guy you'd like to have a beer with, not what is his position on issues, which are mostly unintelligible anyway. The whole advertising pressure is just extraordinary. It influences the way the campaigns are shaped, the way the debates are presented, the media coverage and so on, directing people to focus on marginal questions.

One interesting measure that's been studied over the years is powerlessness: do you feel powerless in the political system? That rose to new heights in this election, way beyond earlier levels, which were already high enough.

HARRIS: Could you describe for us some of your own vision of how people can feel power, what power means in a democracy?

CHOMSKY: It's worth remembering the principles on the basis of which this country was founded. In many ways, the last election was actually a validation of those principles. If you go back to the framing of the Constitution in the 1780s, the leading framer was James Madison, a very astute and lucid political thinker. In the debates of the Constitutional Convention, Madison explained very clearly what kind of a country they were creating. It was to be one in which government would be "committed to protecting the minority of the opulent against the majority." Power would have to be in the hands of what he called "the wealth of the nation," the people who "sympathized with property." That meant the owners of property, not the great mass of the population. The latter had to be fragmented and marginalized. And, in fact, the system was set up that way. Now, throughout the nineteenth century, there was enormous struggle over this social arrangement, with increasing waves of popular, democratic struggles that struck serious and important blows against this elitist conception. Against wage labor, I should say, which in the mid-nineteenth century, wasn't considered among the population to be very

different from slavery. In fact, the Republican Party in the 1860s took a position opposing wage labor. They said, free labor. You don't sell yourself. You don't rent yourself. The popular movements that developed in those days frequently advocated community and worker ownership of manufacturing industry and other business. These were ideas then with deeply seated roots, as American as apple pie. They had nothing to do with European radicals or Marx. They were the ideas of young factory women, for example, coming in from the farms to work in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Now, we happen to have in the United States a highly class conscious business class. And there was in fact a class war as this business class sought to ensure its economic and social predominance, that they would take over and administer markets. They didn't then (and don't now) want free markets. They wanted administered, controlled markets. They wanted to dominate the political process, to maintain the basic principles of the Madisonian system, which are not democracy, but what is called in political science these days "polyarchy." The public [would] remain spectators, not participants in the political process, their only role being to ratify every couple of years some individual from the dominant classes as their elected leader.

Well, that's where the feeling of powerlessness comes from. In fact, the latest election reflected the way a polyarchy ought to work. Now, the major reason for this situation was the rise of corporations in the latter part of the nineteenth century, which essentially settled the conflict between democracy and autocracy, in favor of autocracy. This power has also increased sharply in recent decades. For example, there is a completely new legal doctrine called "regulatory taking" that was invented by lawyers and judges during the Reagan years. This doctrine modifies the taking clause in the Fifth Amendment, which originally required government to pay you when it does things like decide to build a road in your backyard. Now it means that corporations can sue states should they carry out acts considered "tantamount to expropriation." In other words, acts that might interfere with future profits.

This means that regulations to protect the environment or work standards could, under these doctrines, be regarded as regulatory taking and overturned. It means extreme rights granted to private power, investors, lenders, and others, at the expense of the public. The latest international trade agreements all contain this regulatory taking doctrine.

Well, you know, that's a big part of why people feel powerless. People are not stupid. If you look at popular attitudes on the major economic issues, you see that people understand (according to 1998 polls) that the capital mobility touted in the trade agreements means increasing the threat of losing their jobs: being unable to stand up for better wages and benefits because of the threat of losing your job, which is an extremely powerful threat. All of that has to do with the ability of a corporation to threaten to put their production facilities abroad and transfer products back to the United States. They call it trade, but it isn't trade. It's administered economic interchanges centrally controlled within private corporations.

Now, if you ask, why do people feel powerless? Well, because objectively speaking, a socioeconomic system has been developed that concentrates power enormously, with tremendous effects on economic and social life, the political system, and so on.

Today, there's a huge industry called the advertising/public relations industry that spends enormous effort trying to induce the public to fulfill what are called created or invented wants. To focus their attention on what are called the superficial things of life, like fashionable consumption. In the United States this is an enormous part of the economy. It was designed for indoctrination and control and is committed to ensuring that private power has an overwhelming effect over the whole social and political and economic life.

So in a doctrinal system run by concentrated private power, people are just spectators and not participants. Accordingly, they come to perceive their lives, their values and goals, as entailing either just getting by somehow or maybe consuming things that they're told they want and they're propagandized into believing they must have. Well, okay, this is a kind of social organization. We shouldn't confuse it with democracy or freedom or justice. All this reflects itself in feelings of powerlessness and alienation. And many other mental disorders, I should say. For example, the International Labor Organization, which monitors these things, has found in the last couple of years a very significant increase in mental health disorders among working people. It's a substantial thing. Primarily in North America but also in Europe. And they give a reason—worker insecurity. People don't have control of their lives. They don't know what's going to happen to them.

They don't know if they'll be kicked out of their job. Their wages have stagnated or even declined for twenty-five years. They're working harder than ever. And a final comment on this issue. All of this is considered a wonderful fact about our economy. When [chairman of the Federal Reserve] Alan Greenspan testifies before Congress on the great economy he claims to be responsible for, he attributes a lot of its success to what he calls "growing worker insecurity." That means that people are afraid to ask for decent wages and benefits or to form unions and work together. They're afraid for good reasons. Because of policies and programs that have, over the last twenty years primarily, simply undermined the potential for democratic action, and purposefully so.

HARRIS: You've been an activist, writer, and social critic for many years. In the context of a world with so many problems, how do you maintain your hope and optimism? What's the secret of that for you?

CHOMSKY: Well, they're not secrets. They're pretty obvious. One is that over time things have improved. I mean, we should concentrate on what's bleak. We should concentrate on injustice. Because we want to change it. But if we look realistically, things are a lot better than they were in the past. Even in the very recent past.

For example, now there's a problem of how to ensure that Medicare survives in a decent

way. There was no such problem in 1960 because there was no such program. Now there's a question of whether women's rights are really being protected. It wasn't true in 1960 because it wasn't an issue. Or to take just the question of human survival, survival of the species. In a couple of generations, will the world be livable? In a market system, you don't ask that question because future generations don't have dollars to put down. That's the issue raised by the environmental movement. Thirty or forty years ago the movement didn't exist.

Of course, progress is not constantly upwards. There are periods of regression. But over time things do get better. But they don't get better by gifts. They get better by people looking at what's wrong and struggling to change it. And that's very much within our power. You know, with all the criticisms you can make of the way the United States is organized, it's the most free country in the world. They're not going to throw you in a torture chamber for the conversation you and I are now having. We have a lot of options, a lot of privileges.

And there are plenty of things we can do to deal with the problems that exist -- if we face the challenges and deal with them, just as people have always done.