

Understanding Power

The Indispensable Chomsky

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stood can probably be described pretty simply. And when words like "dialectics" come along, or "hermeneutics," and all this kind of stuff that's supposed to be very profound, like Goering, "I reach for my revolver."

MAN: *I find it very reinforcing that you don't understand the word "dialectics," it sort of validates me.*

I'm not saying that it doesn't have any meaning—you observe people using the term and they look like they're communicating. But it's like when I watch people talking Turkish: something's going on, but I'm not part of it. Actually, occasionally in interviews I've said this about not understanding "dialectics," and I get long letters back from people saying, "You don't understand, here's what 'dialectical' is"—and either it's incomprehensible, or else it's trivial. So maybe I've got a gene missing or something—like people can be tone-deaf, they just can't hear the music. But everything I encounter in these fields either seems to be sort of interesting, but pretty obvious once you see it—maybe you didn't see it at first, and somebody had to point it out to you—or else just incomprehensible.

I'm skeptical: I think one has a right to be skeptical when you don't understand something. I mean, when I look at a page of, say, quantum electrodynamics, I don't understand a word of it. But I know what I would have to do to get to understand it, and I'm pretty confident that I *could* get to understand it—I've understood other complicated things. So I figure if I bothered to put myself through the discipline, and I studied the early stuff and the later stuff, I'd finally get to the point where I understood it. Or I could go to someone in the Physics Department and say, "Tell me why everybody's excited about this stuff," and they could adapt it to my level and tell me how to pursue it further. Maybe I wouldn't understand it very deeply, or I couldn't have invented it or something, but I'd at least begin to understand it. On the other hand, when I look at a page of Marxist philosophy or literary theory, I have the feeling that I could stare at it for the rest of my life and I'd never understand it—and I don't know how to proceed to get to understand it any better, I don't even know what steps I could take.

I mean, it's possible that these fields are beyond me, maybe I'm not smart enough or something. But that would have kind of a funny conclusion—it's nothing to do with me. That would mean that somehow in these domains people have been able to create something that's more complex than physics and mathematics—because those are subjects I think I could get to understand. And I just don't believe that, frankly: I don't believe that literary theorists or Marxian philosophers have advanced to some new intellectual level that transcends century after century of hard intellectual work.

MAN: *Do you think the same thing about philosophy in general?*

There are parts of philosophy which I think I understand, and it's most of classical philosophy. And there are things that I don't understand, because

they don't make any sense—and that's okay too, these are hard questions. I mean, it's not necessarily a criticism to say that something doesn't make sense: there are subjects that it's hard to talk sensibly about. But if I read, say, Russell, or analytic philosophy, or Wittgenstein and so on, I think I can come to understand what they're saying, and I can see why I think it's wrong, as I often do. But when I read, you know, Derrida, or Lacan, or Althusser, or any of these—I just don't understand it. It's like words passing in front of my eyes: I can't follow the arguments, I don't see the arguments, anything that looks like a description of a fact looks wrong to me. So maybe I'm missing a gene or something, it's possible. But my honest opinion is, I think it's all fraud.

MAN: *I think you may be glorifying the scientists a bit by projecting them as somehow kind of pure. For example, take Newtonian mechanics: Einstein came along and showed how it was wrong, but over the years the scientific community did refer to it as "Newtonian" mechanics.*

That's an interesting case, because Newtonian mechanics was treated as kind of holy—because it was such a revolutionary development. I mean, it was really the first time in human history that people ever had an explanation of things in any deep sense: it was so comprehensive, and so simple, and so far-reaching in its consequences that it almost looked like it was *necessary*. And in fact, it was treated that way for a long time—so much so that Kant, for example, regarded it as the task of philosophy to derive Newtonian physics from *a priori* principles, and to show that it was certain truth, on a par with mathematics. And it really wasn't until the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century that the fallacy of those conceptions became quite clear, and with that realization there was a real advance in our conception of what "science" is. So science did have kind of a religious character for a period, you're right—and that was something we had to get ourselves out of, I think. It doesn't happen anymore.

Ideological Control in the Sciences and Humanities

MAN: *Would you say that as academic disciplines, the sciences are fundamentally different from the humanities and social sciences in terms of ideological control? There don't seem to be the same kinds of barriers to inquiry or the same commitment to indoctrination in the scientific fields as there are in other areas, like in economics or political science, for instance.*

Well, I think there was an ideological control problem in the sciences, it's just that we transcended it—Galileo faced it, for example [the Italian astronomer and scientist was arrested by the Roman Catholic Church in 1633 and compelled to renounce his conclusion that the earth revolves around the sun]. You go back a couple centuries in the West and the ideol-

logical control problem in the sciences was severe: Descartes is alleged to have destroyed the final volume of his treatise on the world, the one that was supposed to deal with the human mind, because he learned of the fate of Galileo. That's the analog to death squads—the Inquisition was doing precisely that. Okay, that's passed in the West at least, but not everywhere.

MAN: *But why has it passed?*

Well, I think there are a few reasons. One is just a general increase in freedom and enlightenment, won through popular struggles over centuries—we've become a much freer society than we were in absolutist times. And intellectuals have often played a role in that, breaking down ideological barriers and creating kind of a space for greater freedom of thought, for instance during the Enlightenment [in the eighteenth century]. That often took a lot of courage and quite a struggle, and it goes on until today.

There are also utilitarian reasons. It turns out that, especially since the mid-nineteenth century, the ability to gain a deeper understanding of the physical world through modern science has interacted critically with modern industrial development: progress in the sciences has contributed materially to private profit-making, private power. So there are utilitarian reasons for allowing freedom of scientific inquiry, but I wouldn't over-exaggerate them—I think what's happened with the sciences is a lot like the process that's led to freedom in other domains, like why we don't have slavery, let's say, or why after 150 years of American history women won the right to vote [in 1920].

And also, remember, after the great scientific revolutions that led to the Enlightenment, it got to the point where you couldn't *do* science anymore if you were subjected to the kinds of doctrinal controls that remain quite effective in other fields. I mean, if you're a physicist after Newton trying to spin off ideological fanaticism, you're just out of the game—progress has been too much. That's very different from the social sciences and the humanities—you can tell falsehoods forever in those fields and nothing will ever stop you, like you don't have Mother Nature around keeping you honest. And the result is, there's a real difference in the two cultures.

So when you go to graduate school in the natural sciences, you're immediately brought into critical inquiry—and in fact, what you're learning is kind of a craft; you don't really *teach* science, people sort of get the idea how to do it as apprentices, hopefully by working with good people. But the goal is to learn how to do creative work, and to challenge everything. That's very different from the humanities and the social sciences, where what you're supposed to do is absorb a body of knowledge, and then pick yourself a little area in it and for the rest of your life work on that. I mean, the way you become a highly respected scholar in the humanities, say, is to pick some arcane area, like English novels from 1720 to 1790, and get to know more of the *data* about that than any other human being in history.

So you know who copied this word from that, and so on. A lot of it is kind of mindless, but that's the sort of thing you're supposed to know. And there's really very little intellectual challenge: the only way you could be wrong is if you got a comma out of place—and in fact, that's considered the worst crime. I'm kind of caricaturing it a bit—but frankly I think it works this way. And certainly the sciences are very different.

The Function of the Schools

WOMAN: *But I guess I don't quite see how this ideological control mechanism actually works in the humanities and social sciences—I mean, how exactly is it that the schools end up being an indoctrination system? Can you describe the process in more detail?*

Well, the main point I think is that the entire school curriculum, from kindergarten through graduate school, will be tolerated only so long as it continues to perform its institutional role. So take the universities, which in many respects are not very different from the media in the way they function—though they're a much more complex system, so they're harder to study systematically. Universities do not generate nearly enough funds to support themselves from tuition money alone: they're parasitic institutions that need to be supported from the outside, and that means they're dependent on wealthy alumni, on corporations, and on the government, which are groups with the same basic interests. Well, as long as the universities *serve* those interests, they'll be funded. If they ever *stop* serving those interests, they'll start to get in trouble.

So for example, in the late 1960s it began to appear that the universities were *not* adequately performing that service—students were asking questions, they were thinking independently, they were rejecting a lot of the Establishment value-system, challenging all sorts of things—and the corporations began to react to that, they began to react in a number of ways. For one thing, they began to develop alternative programs, like I.B.M. began to set up kind of a vocational training program to produce engineers on their own: if M.I.T. wasn't going to do it for them the way they wanted, they'd do it themselves—and that would have meant they'd stop funding M.I.T. Well, of course things never really got out of hand in the Sixties, so the moves in that direction were very limited. But those are the kinds of pressures there are.⁸

And in fact, you can even see similar things right now. Take all this business about Allan Bloom and that book everybody's been talking about, *The Closing of the American Mind*.⁹ It's this huge best-seller, I don't know if you've bothered looking at it—it's mind-bogglingly stupid. I read it once in the supermarket while my . . . I hate to say it, while my wife was shopping I stood there and read the damn thing; it takes about fifteen minutes to read.

MAN: *You read two thousand words a minute?*

I mean, "read"—you know, sort of turn the pages to see if there's anything there that isn't totally stupid. But what that book is basically saying is that education ought to be set up like some sort of variant of the Marine Corps, in which you just march the students through a canon of "great thoughts" that are picked out for everybody. So some group of people will say, "Here are the great thoughts, the great thoughts of Western civilization are in this corpus; you guys sit there and learn them, read them and learn them, and be able to repeat them." That's the kind of model Bloom is calling for.

Well, anybody who's ever thought about education or been involved in it, or even gone to school, knows that the effect of that is that students will end up knowing and understanding virtually nothing. It doesn't matter how great the thoughts are, if they are simply imposed upon you from the outside and you're forced through them step by step, after you're done you'll have forgotten what they are. I mean, I'm sure that every one of you has taken any number of courses in school in which you worked, and you did your homework, you passed the exam, maybe you even got an "A"—and a week later you couldn't even remember what the course was about. You only learn things and learn how to think if there's some purpose for learning, some motivation that's coming out of *you* somehow. In fact, all of the methodology in education isn't really much more than that—getting students to want to learn. Once they want to learn, they'll do it.

But the point is that this model Bloom and all these other people are calling for is just a part of the whole method of imposing discipline through the schools, and of preventing people from learning how to think for themselves. So what you do is make students go through and sort of memorize a canon of what are called "Good Books," which you force on them, and then somehow great things are supposed to happen. It's a completely stupid form of education, but I think that's part of why it's selected and supported, and why there's so much hysteria that it's been questioned in past years—just because it's very functional to train people and discipline them in ways like this. The popularity of the Bloom thing, I would imagine, is mostly a reaction to the sort of liberating effect that the student movement of the Sixties and other challenges to the schools and universities began to have.

WOMAN: *All of Allan Bloom's "great thoughts" are by elite white males.*

Yeah, okay—but it wouldn't even matter if he had some different array of material, it really wouldn't matter. The idea that there's some array of "the deep thoughts," and we smart people will pick them out and you dumb guys will learn them—or memorize them at least, because you don't really learn them if they're just forced on you—that's nonsense. If you're serious about, say, reading Plato,¹⁰ it's fine to read Plato—but you try to fig-

ure out what's right, what's wrong, what's a better way of looking at it, why was he saying this when he should have been saying something else, what grotesque error of reasoning did he make over here, and so on and so forth. That's the way you would read serious work, just like you would in the sciences. But you're not supposed to read it that way here, you're supposed to read it because it's the truth, or it's the great thoughts or something. And that's kind of like the worst form of theology.

The point is, it doesn't matter *what* you read, what matters is *how* you read it. Now, I don't mean comic books, but there's a lot of cultural wealth out there from all over the place, and to learn what it means for something to be culturally rich, you can explore almost anywhere: there's no fixed subset that is the basis of truth and understanding. I mean, you can read the "Good Books," and memorize what they said, and forget them a week later—if it doesn't *mean* anything to you personally, you'd might as well not have read them. And it's very hard to know what's *going* to mean something to different people. But there's plenty of exciting literature around in the world, and there's absolutely no reason to believe that unless you've read the Greeks and Dante and so on, you've missed things—I mean, yeah, you've missed things, but you've also missed things if you haven't learned something about other cultural traditions too.

Just take a look at philosophy, for example, which is a field that I know something about: some of the best, most exciting, most active philosophers in the contemporary world, people who've made a real impact on the field, couldn't tell Plato from Aristotle, except for what they remember from some Freshman course they once took. Now, that's not to say you shouldn't read Plato and Aristotle—sure, there are millions of things you should read; nobody's ever going to read more than a tiny fraction of the things you wished you knew. But just reading them does you no good: you only learn if the material is integrated into your own creative processes somehow, otherwise it just passes through your mind and disappears. And there's nothing valuable about that—it has basically the effect of learning the catechism, or memorizing the Constitution or something like that.

Real education is about getting people involved in thinking for themselves—and that's a tricky business to know how to do well, but clearly it requires that whatever it is you're looking at has to somehow catch people's interest and make them *want* to think, and make them *want* to pursue and explore. And just regurgitating "Good Books" is absolutely the worst way to do it—that's just a way of turning people into automata. You may call that an education if you want, but it's really the opposite of an education, which is why people like William Bennett [Reagan's Secretary of Education] and Allan Bloom and these others are all so much in favor of it.

WOMAN: *Are you saying that the real purpose of the universities and the schools is just to indoctrinate people—and really not much else?*

Well, I'm not quite saying that. Like, I wouldn't say that *no* meaningful work takes place in the schools, or that they only exist to provide manpower for the corporate system or something like that—these are very complex systems, after all. But the basic institutional role and function of the schools, and why they're supported, is to provide an ideological service: there's a real selection for obedience and conformity. And I think that process starts in kindergarten, actually.

Let me just tell you a personal story. My oldest, closest friend is a guy who came to the United States from Latvia when he was fifteen, fleeing from Hitler. He escaped to New York with his parents and went to George Washington High School, which in those days at least was the school for bright Jewish kids in New York City. And he once told me that the first thing that struck him about American schools was the fact that if he got a "C" in a course, nobody cared, but if he came to school three minutes late he was sent to the principal's office—and that generalized. He realized that what it meant is, what's valued here is the ability to work on an assembly line, even if it's an intellectual assembly line. The important thing is to be able to obey orders, and to do what you're told, and to be where you're supposed to be. The values are, you're going to be a factory worker somewhere—maybe they'll call it a university—but you're going to be following somebody else's orders, and just doing your work in some prescribed way. And what matters is discipline, not figuring things out for yourself, or understanding things that interest you—those are kind of marginal: just make sure you meet the requirements of a factory.

Well, that's pretty much what the schools are like, I think: they reward discipline and obedience, and they punish independence of mind. If you happen to be a little innovative, or maybe you forgot to come to school one day because you were reading a book or something, that's a tragedy, that's a crime—because you're not supposed to think, you're supposed to obey, and just proceed through the material in whatever way they require.

And in fact, most of the people who make it through the education system and get into the elite universities are able to do it because they've been willing to obey a lot of stupid orders for years and years—that's the way I did it, for example. Like, you're told by some stupid teacher, "Do this, which you know makes no sense whatsoever, but you do it, and if you do it you get to the next rung, and then you obey the next order, and finally you work your way through and they give you your letters: an awful lot of education is like that, from the very beginning. Some people go along with it because they figure, "Okay, I'll do any stupid thing that asshole says because I want to get ahead"; others do it because they've just internalized the values—but after a while, those two things tend to get sort of blurred. But you do it, or else you're out: you ask too many questions and you're going to get in trouble.

Now, there are also people who *don't* go along—and they're called "behavior problems," or "unmotivated," or things like that. Well, you don't

want to be too glib about it—there *are* children with behavior problems—but a lot of them are just independent-minded, or don't like to conform, or just want to go their own way. And they get into trouble right from the very beginning, and are typically weeded out. I mean, I've taught young kids too, and the fact is there are always some who just don't take your word for it. And the very unfortunate tendency is to try to beat them down, because they're a pain in the neck. But what they ought to be is encouraged. Yeah: why take my word for it? Who the heck am I? Figure it out for yourself. That's what real education would be *about*, in fact.

Actually, I happen to have been very lucky myself and gone to an experimental-progressive Deweyite school, from about the time I was age one and a half to twelve [John Dewey was an American philosopher and educational reformer]. And there it was done routinely: children were encouraged to challenge everything, and you sort of worked on your own, you were supposed to think things through for yourself—it was a real experience. And it was quite a striking change when it ended and I had to go to the city high school, which was the pride of the city school system. It was the school for academically-oriented kids in Philadelphia—and it was the dumbest, most ridiculous place I've ever been, it was like falling into a black hole or something. For one thing, it was extremely competitive—because that's one of the best ways of controlling people. So everybody was ranked, and you always knew exactly where you were: are you third in the class, or maybe did you move down to fourth? All of this stuff is put into people's heads in various ways in the schools—that you've got to beat down the person next to you, and just look out for yourself. And there are all sorts of other things like that too.

But the point is, there's nothing *necessary* about them in education. I know, because I went through an alternative to it—so it can certainly be done. But given the external power structure of the society in which they function now, the institutional role of the schools for the most part is just to train people for obedience and conformity, and to make them controllable and indoctrinated—and as long as the schools fulfill that role, they'll be supported.

Now, of course, it doesn't work a hundred percent—so you do get some people all the way through who don't go along. And as I was saying, in the sciences at least, people have to be trained for creativity and disobedience—because there is no other way you can *do* science. But in the humanities and social sciences, and in fields like journalism and economics and so on, that's much less true—there people have to be trained to be managers, and controllers, and to accept things, and not to question too much. So you really do get a very different kind of education. And people who break out of line are weeded out or beaten back in all kinds of ways.

I mean, it's not very abstract: if you're, say, a young person in college, or in journalism, or for that matter a fourth grader, and you have too much of an independent mind, there's a whole variety of devices that will be used to

deflect you from that error—and if you can't be controlled, to marginalize or just eliminate you. In fourth grade, you're a "behavior problem." In college, you may be "irresponsible," or "erratic," or "not the right kind of student." If you make it to the faculty, you'll fail in what's sometimes called "collegiality," getting along with your colleagues. If you're a young journalist and you're pursuing stories that the people at the managerial level above you understand, either intuitively or explicitly, are not to be pursued, you can be sent off to work at the Police desk, and advised that you don't have "proper standards of objectivity." There's a whole range of these techniques.

Now, we live in a free society, so you don't get sent to gas chambers and they don't send the death squads after you—as is commonly done, and not far from here, say in Mexico.¹¹ But there are nevertheless quite successful devices, both subtle and extreme, to ensure that doctrinal correctness is not seriously infringed upon.

Subtler Methods of Control

Let me just start with some of the more subtle ways; I'll give you an example. After I finished college, I went to this program at Harvard called the "Society of Fellows"—which is kind of this elite finishing school, where they teach you to be a Harvard or Yale professor, and to drink the right wine, and say the right things, and so on and so forth. I mean, you had all of the resources of Harvard available to you and your only responsibility was to show up at a dinner once a week, so it was great for just doing your work if you wanted to. But the real point of the whole thing was socialization: teaching the right values.

For instance, I remember there was a lot of anglophilia at Harvard at the time—you were supposed to wear British clothes, and pretend you spoke with a British accent, that sort of stuff. In fact, there were actually guys there who I thought were British, who had never been outside of the United States. If any of you have studied literature or history or something, you might recognize some of this, those are the places you usually find it. Well, somehow I managed to survive that, I don't know how exactly—but most didn't. And what I discovered is that a large part of education at the really elite institutions is simply refinement, teaching the social graces: what kind of clothes you should wear, how to drink port the right way, how to have polite conversation without talking about serious topics, but of course indicating that you *could* talk about serious topics if you were so vulgar as to actually do it, all kinds of things which an intellectual is supposed to know how to do. And that was really the main point of the program, I think.

Actually, there are much more important cases too—and they're even more revealing about the role of the elite schools. For example, the 1930s were a period of major labor strife and labor struggle in the U.S., and it was

scaring the daylight out of the whole business community here—because labor was finally winning the right to organize, and there were other legislative victories as well. And there were a lot of efforts to try to overcome this, but one of them was that Harvard introduced a "Trade Union Program." What it did was to bring in rising young people in the labor movement—you know, the guy who looks like he's going to be the Local president next year—and have them stay in dorms in the Business School, and put them through a whole socialization process, help them come to share some of the values and understandings of the elite, teach them that "Our job is to work together," "We're all in this together," and so on and so forth. I mean, there are always two lines: for the public it's, "We're all in this together, management and labor are cooperating, joint enterprise, harmony" and so on—meanwhile business is fighting a vicious class war on the side. And that effort to socialize and integrate union activists—well, I've never measured its success, but I'm sure it was very successful. And the process was similar to what I experienced and saw a Harvard education to be myself.

Or let me tell you another story I heard about twenty years ago from a black civil rights activist who came up to study at Harvard Law School—a kind of illustrates some of the other pressures that are around. This guy gave a talk in which he described how the kids starting off at Harvard Law School come in with long hair and backpacks and social ideals, they're all going to go into public service law to change the world and so on—that's the first year. Around springtime, the recruiters come for the cushy summer jobs in the Wall Street law firms, and these students figure, "What the heck, I can put on a tie and a jacket and shave for one day, just because I need that money and why shouldn't I have it?" So they put on the tie and the jacket for that one day, and they get the job, and then they go off for the summer—and when they come back in the fall, it's ties, and jackets, and obedience, a shift of ideology. Sometimes it takes two years.

Well, obviously he was over-drawing the point—but those sorts of factors also are very influential. I mean, I've felt it all my life: it's extremely easy to be sucked into the dominant culture, it can be very appealing. There are a lot of rewards. And what's more, the people you meet don't look like bad people—you don't want to sit there and insult them. Maybe they're perfectly nice people. So you try to be friends, maybe you even are friends. Well, you begin to conform, you begin to adapt, you begin to smooth off the harsher edges—and pretty soon it's just happened, it kind of seeps in. And education at a place like Harvard is largely geared to that, to a remarkable extent in fact.

And there are many other subtle mechanisms which contribute to ideological control as well, of course—including just the fact that the universities support and encourage people to occupy themselves with irrelevant and innocuous work.

Or just take the fact that certain topics are unstudiable in the schools—

because they don't fall anywhere: the disciplines are divided in such a way that they simply will not be studied. That's something that's extremely important. So for example, take a question that people were very worried about in the United States for years and years—the economic competitiveness of Japan. Now, I always thought the talk about "American declinism" and "Japan as Number 1" was vastly overblown, just as the later idea of a "Japanese decline" is wildly exaggerated. In fact, Japan retains a very considerable edge in crucial areas of manufacturing, especially in high tech. They did get in trouble because of a huge stock market and real estate boom that collapsed, but serious economists don't believe that Japan has really lost competitiveness in these areas.¹²

Well, why has Japan been so economically competitive? I mean, there are a lot of reasons why, but the major reason is very clear. Both Japan and the United States (and every other industrial country in the world, actually) have essentially state-coordinated economies—but our traditional system of state coordination is less efficient than theirs.

Remember, talk about "free trade" is fine in editorials, but nobody actually practices it in reality: in every modern economy, the taxpayers are made to subsidize the private corporations, who then keep the profits for themselves. But the point is, different countries have different ways of arranging those subsidies. So take a look at the competitive parts of the U.S. economy, the parts that are successful in international trade—they're all state-subsidized. Capital-intensive agriculture is a well-known case: American capital-intensive agriculture is able to compete internationally because the state purchases the excess products and stores them, and subsidizes the energy inputs, and so on.

Or look at high-technology industry: research and development for high technology is very costly, and corporations don't make any profits off it directly—so therefore the taxpayer is made to pay for it. And in the United States, that's traditionally been done largely through the Pentagon system: the Pentagon pays for high-tech research and development, then if something comes out of it which happens to be marketable, it's handed over to private corporations so they can make the profits. And the research mostly isn't weapons, incidentally—it's things like computers, which are the center of any contemporary industrial economy, and were developed through the Pentagon system in the United States. And the same is true of virtually all high tech, in fact. And furthermore, there's another important subsidy there: the Pentagon also purchases the *output* of high-technology industry, it serves as a state-guaranteed market for waste-production—that's what contracts for developing weapons systems are; I mean, you don't actually use the weapons you're paying for, you just destroy them in a couple years and replace them with the next array of even more advanced stuff you don't need. Well, all of that is just perfect for pouring continuous taxpayer subsidies into high-tech industry, and it's because of these enormous subsidies that American high tech is competitive internationally.

Well, Japan has run its economy pretty much the same way we do, except with one crucial difference. Instead of using the military system, the way they've worked their public subsidies in Japan is they have a government ministry, M.I.T.I. [the Ministry of International Trade and Industry], which sits down with the big corporations and conglomerates and banking firms, and plans their economic system for the next couple years—they plan how much consumption there's going to be, and how much investment there's going to be, and where the investment should go, and so on. Well, that's more efficient. And since Japan is a very disciplined and obedient society culturally, the population there just does what they tell them, and nobody ever asks any questions about it.

Alright, to see how this difference played out over the years, just look at the "Star Wars" program in the United States, for example. Star Wars [the Strategic Defense Initiative] is the pretext for a huge amount of research and development spending through the Pentagon system here—it's our way of funding the new generation of computer technology, lasers, new software, and so on. Well, if you look at the distribution of expenses for Star Wars, it turns out that it was virtually the same allocation of funding as was made through the Japanese state-directed economic system in the same time period: in those same years, M.I.T.I. made about the same judgments about how to distribute their resources as we did, they spent about the same proportion of money in lasers, and the same proportion in software, and so on.¹³ And the reason is that all of these planners make approximately the same judgments about the likely new technologies.

Well, why was Japan so competitive with the U.S. economically, despite highly inauspicious conditions? There are a lot of reasons. But the main reason is that they directed their public subsidy straight to the commercial market. So to work on lasers, they tried to figure out ways of producing lasers for the commercial market, and they do it pretty well. But when we want to develop lasers for the commercial market, what we do is pour the money into the Pentagon, which then tries to work out a way to use a laser to shoot down a missile ten thousand miles away—and if they can work that out, then they hope there'll be some commercial spin-offs that come out of it all. Okay, that's less efficient. And since the Japanese are no dumber than we are, and they have an efficient system of state-coordination while we have an inefficient one, over the years they succeeded in the economic competition.

Well, these are major phenomena of modern life—but where do you go to study them in the universities or the academic profession? That's a very interesting question. You don't go to the economics department, because that's not what they look at: the real hot-shot economics departments are interested in abstract models of how a pure free-enterprise economy works—you know, generalizations to ten-dimensional space of some nonexistent free-market system. You don't go to the political science department, because they're concerned with electoral statistics, and voting patterns, and

micro-bureaucracy—like the way one government bureaucrat talks to another in some detailed air. You don't go to the anthropology department, because they're studying hill tribesmen in New Guinea. You don't go to the sociology department, because they're studying crime in the ghettos. In fact, you don't go anywhere—there isn't any field that deals with these topics. There's no journal that deals with them. In fact, there is no academic profession that is concerned with the central problems of modern society. Now, you can go to the *business school*, and there they'll talk about them—because those people are in the real world. But not in the academic departments: nobody there is going to tell you what's really going on in the world.¹⁴

And it's extremely important that there *not* be a field that studies these questions—because if there ever were such a field, people might come to understand too much, and in a relatively free society like ours, they might start to do something with that understanding. Well, no institution is going to encourage *that*. I mean, there's nothing in what I just said that you couldn't explain to junior high school students, it's all pretty straightforward. But it's not what you study in a junior high Civics course—what you study there is propaganda about the way systems are supposed to work but don't.

Incidentally, part of the genius of this aspect of the higher education system is that it can get people to sell out even while they think they're doing exactly the right thing. So some young person going into academia will say to herself, "Look, I'm going to be a real radical here"—and you *can* be, as long as you adapt yourself to these categories which guarantee that you'll never ask the right questions, and that you'll never even *look* at the right questions. But you don't *feel* like you're selling out, you're not saying "I'm working for the ruling class" or anything like that—you're not, you're being a Marxist economist or something. But the effect is, they've totally neutralized you.

Alright, all of these are subtle forms of control, with the effect of preventing serious insight into the way that power actually works in the society. And it makes very good sense for a system to be set up like that: powerful institutions don't want to be investigated, obviously. Why would they? They don't want the public to know how they work—maybe the people inside them understand how they work, but they don't want anybody else to know, because that would threaten and undermine their power. So one should *expect* the institutions to function in such a way as to protect themselves—and some of the ways in which they protect themselves are by various subtle techniques of ideological control like these.

Cruder Methods of Control

Then aside from all that, there are also crude methods of control. So if some young political scientist or economist decides they *are* going to try to

ask these kinds of questions, the chances are they're going to be marginalized in some fashion, or else be weeded out of the institution altogether. At the extreme end, there have been repeated university purges in the United States. During the 1950s, for example, the universities were just cleaned out of dissident thought—people were fired on all kinds of grounds, or not allowed to teach things. And the effects of that were very strong. Then during the late 1960s, when the political ferment really got going, the purges began again—and often they were just straight political firings, not even obscured.¹⁵ For instance, a lot of the best Asia scholars from the United States are now teaching in Australia and Japan—because they couldn't keep jobs in the U.S., they had the wrong ideas. Australia has some of the best Southeast Asia scholars in the world, and they're mostly Americans who were young scholars in the Sixties and couldn't make it into the American academic system, because they thought the wrong things. So if you want to study Cambodia with a top American scholar, you basically have to go to Australia.¹⁶ One of the best Japan historians in the world [Herbert Bix] is teaching in a Japanese university—he's American, but he can't get a job in the United States.

Or let me just tell you a story about M.I.T., which is pretty revealing. A young political science professor—who's by now one of the top people in the field, incidentally [Thomas Ferguson]—was appointed at M.I.T. as an assistant professor right after he got his Ph.D. from Princeton; he's very radical, but he's also extremely smart, so the department just needed him. Well, one day I was sitting in my office and he came over fuming. He told me that the chairman of his department had just come into his office and told him straight out: "If you ever want to get tenure in this department, keep away from anything after the New Deal; you can write all of your radical stuff up to the New Deal, but if you try and do it for the post-New Deal period, you're never going to get tenure in this department."¹⁷ He just told him straight out. Usually you're not told it straight out, but you get to understand it—you get to understand it from the reactions you receive.

This kind of stuff also happens with graduate students. I'm what's called an "Institute Professor" at M.I.T., which means I can teach courses in any department of the university. And over the years I've taught all over the place—but if I even get *near* Political Science, you can feel the bad vibes starting. So in other departments, I'm often asked to be on students' Ph.D. committees, but in Political Science it's virtually never happened—and the few times it has happened, it's always been Third World women. And there's a reason for that: Third World women have a little bit of extra space to maneuver in, because the department doesn't want to appear *too* overtly racist or *too* overtly sexist, so there are some things they can do that other people can't.

Well, a few years ago, one very smart woman graduate student in the Political Science Department wanted to do her dissertation on the media and Southern Africa, and she wanted me to be on her Ph.D. committee. Okay,

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it's a topic that I'm interested in, and I've worked on it probably more than anybody else there, so there was just no way for them to say I couldn't do it. Then the routine started. The first stage in the doctoral process is that the candidate has a meeting with a couple of faculty members and presents her proposal. Usually two faculty members show up, that's about it. This time it was different: they circulated a notice through the department saying that every faculty member had to show up—and the reason was, I was going to be there, and they had to combat this baleful influence. So everybody showed up.

Well, the woman started presenting her dissertation proposal, and you could just see people turning pale. Somebody asked her, "What's your hypothesis?"—you're supposed to have a hypothesis—and it was that media coverage of Southern Africa is going to be influenced by corporate interests. People were practically passing out and falling out the windows. Then starts the critical analysis: "What's your methodology going to be? What tests are you going to use?" And gradually an apparatus was set up and a level of proof demanded that you just can't meet in the social sciences. It wasn't, "I'm going to read the editorials and figure out what they say"—you had to count the words, and do all sorts of statistical nonsense, and so on and so forth. But she fought it through, she just continued fighting. They ultimately required so much junk in her thesis, so much irrelevant, phony social-scientific junk, numbers and charts and meaningless business, that you could barely pick out the content from the morass of methodology. But she did finally make it through—just because she was willing to fight it out. Now, you know, you can do that—but it's tough. And some people really get killed.

The Fate of an Honest Intellectual

I'll tell you another, last case—and there are many others like this. Here's a story which is really tragic. How many of you know about Joan Peters, the book by Joan Peters? There was this best-seller a few years ago [in 1984], it went through about ten printings, by a woman named Joan Peters—or at least, signed by Joan Peters—called *From Time Immemorial*. It was a big scholarly-looking book with lots of footnotes, which purported to show that the Palestinians were all recent immigrants [i.e. to the Jewish settled areas of the former Palestine, during the British mandate years of 1920 to 1948]. And it was *very* popular—it got literally hundreds of rave reviews, and no negative reviews: the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, everybody was just raving about it.¹⁹ Here was this book which proved that there were really no Palestinians! Of course, the implicit message was, if Israel kicks them all out there's no moral issue, because they're just recent immigrants who came in because the Jews had built up the country. And there was all kinds of demographic analysis in it, and a big profes-

sor of demography at the University of Chicago [Philip M. Hauser] authenticated it.²⁰ That was the big intellectual hit for that year: Saul Bellow, Barbara Tuchman, everybody was talking about it as the greatest thing since chocolate cake.²¹

Well, one graduate student at Princeton, a guy named Norman Finkelstein, started reading through the book. He was interested in the history of Zionism, and as he read the book he was kind of surprised by some of the things it said. He's a very careful student, and he started checking the references—and it turned out that the whole thing was a hoax, it was completely faked: probably it had been put together by some intelligence agency or something like that. Well, Finkelstein wrote up a short paper of just preliminary findings, it was about twenty-five pages or so, and he sent it around to I think thirty people who were interested in the topic, scholars in the field and so on, saying: "Here's what I've found in this book, do you think it's worth pursuing?"

Well, he got back one answer, from me. I told him, yeah, I think it's an interesting topic, but I warned him, if you follow this, you're going to get in trouble—because you're going to expose the American intellectual community as a gang of frauds, and they are not going to like it, and they're going to destroy you. So I said: if you want to do it, go ahead, but be aware of what you're getting into. It's an important issue, it makes a big difference whether you eliminate the moral basis for driving out a population—it's preparing the basis for some real horrors—so a lot of people's lives could be at stake. But your life is at stake too, I told him, because if you pursue this, your career is going to be ruined.

Well, he didn't believe me. We became very close friends after this, I didn't know him before. He went ahead and wrote up an article, and he started submitting it to journals. Nothing: they didn't even bother responding. I finally managed to place a piece of it in *In These Times*, a tiny left-wing journal published in Illinois, where some of you may have seen it.²² Otherwise nothing, no response. Meanwhile his professors—this is Princeton University, supposed to be a serious place—stopped talking to him: they wouldn't make appointments with him, they wouldn't read his papers, he basically had to quit the program.

By this time, he was getting kind of desperate, and he asked me what to do. I gave him what I thought was good advice, but what turned out to be bad advice: I suggested that he shift over to a different department, where I knew some people and figured he'd at least be treated decently. That turned out to be wrong. He switched over, and when he got to the point of writing his thesis he literally could not get the faculty to read it, he couldn't get them to come to his thesis defense. Finally, out of embarrassment, they granted him a Ph.D.—he's very smart, incidentally—but they will not even write a letter for him saying that he was a student at Princeton University. I mean, sometimes you have students for whom it's hard to write good letters of recommendation, because you really didn't think they were very good—

but you can write *something*, there are ways of doing these things. This guy was good, but he literally cannot get a letter.

He's now living in a little apartment somewhere in New York City, and he's a part-time social worker working with teenage drop-outs. Very promising scholar—if he'd done what he was told, he would have gone on and right now he'd be a professor somewhere at some big university. Instead he's working part-time with disturbed teenaged kids for a couple thousand dollars a year.²³ That's a lot better than a death squad, it's true—it's a whole lot better than a death squad. But those are the techniques of control that are around.

But let me just go on with the Joan Peters story. Finkelstein's very persistent: he took a summer off and sat in the New York Public Library, where he went through every single reference in the book—and he found a record of fraud that you cannot believe. Well, the New York intellectual community is a pretty small place, and pretty soon everybody knew about this, everybody knew the book was a fraud and it was going to be exposed sooner or later. The one journal that was smart enough to react intelligently was the *New York Review of Books*—they knew that the thing was a sham, but the editor didn't want to offend his friends, so he just didn't run a review at all. That was the one journal that *didn't* run a review.

Meanwhile, Finkelstein was being called in by big professors in the field who were telling him, "Look, call off your crusade; you drop this and we'll take care of you, we'll make sure you get a job," all this kind of stuff. But he kept doing it—he kept on and on. Every time there was a favorable review, he'd write a letter to the editor which wouldn't get printed; he was doing whatever he could do. We approached the publishers and asked them if they were going to respond to any of this, and they said no—and they were right. Why should they respond? They had the whole system buttoned up, there was never going to be a critical word about this in the United States. But then they made a technical error: they allowed the book to appear in England, where you can't control the intellectual community quite as easily.

Well, as soon as I heard that the book was going to come out in England, I immediately sent copies of Finkelstein's work to a number of British scholars and journalists who are interested in the Middle East—and they were ready. As soon as the book appeared, it was just demolished, it was blown out of the water. Every major journal, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review*, the *Observer*, everybody had a review saying, this doesn't even reach the level of nonsense, of idiocy. A lot of the criticism used Finkelstein's work without any acknowledgment, I should say—but about the kindest word anybody said about the book was "ludicrous," or "preposterous."²⁴

Well, people here read British reviews—if you're in the American intellectual community, you read the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review*, so it began to get a little embarrassing. You started getting back-tracking: people started saying, "Well, look, I didn't really say the

book was good, I just said it's an interesting topic," things like that. At that point, the *New York Review* swung into action, and they did what they always do in these circumstances. See, there's like a routine that you go through—if a book gets blown out of the water in England in places people here will see, or if a book gets praised in England, you have to react. And if it's a book on Israel, there's a standard way of doing it: you get an Israeli scholar to review it. That's called covering your ass—because whatever an Israeli scholar says, you're pretty safe: no one can accuse the journal of anti-Semitism, none of the usual stuff works.

So after the Peters book got blown out of the water in England, the *New York Review* assigned it to a good person actually, in fact Israel's leading specialist on Palestinian nationalism [Yehoshua Porath], someone who knows a lot about the subject. And he wrote a review, which they then didn't publish—it went on for almost a year without the thing being published; nobody knows exactly what was going on, but you can guess that there must have been a lot of pressure not to publish it. Eventually it was even written up in the *New York Times* that this review wasn't getting published, so finally some version of it did appear.²⁵ It was critical, it said the book is nonsense and so on, but it cut corners, the guy didn't say what he knew.²⁶

Actually, the Israeli reviews in general were extremely critical: the reaction of the Israeli press was that they hoped the book would not be widely read, because ultimately it would be harmful to the Jews—sooner or later it would get exposed, and then it would just look like a fraud and a hoax, and it would reflect badly on Israel.²⁷ They underestimated the American intellectual community, I should say.

Anyhow, by that point the American intellectual community realized that the Peters book was an embarrassment, and it sort of disappeared—nobody talks about it anymore. I mean, you still find it at newsstands in the airport and so on, but the best and the brightest know that they are not supposed to talk about it anymore: because it was exposed and they were exposed.

Well, the point is, what happened to Finkelstein is the kind of thing that can happen when you're an honest critic—and we could go on and on with other cases like that. [Editors' Note: Finkelstein has since published several books with independent presses.]

Still, in the universities or in any other institution, you can often find some dissidents hanging around in the woodwork—and they can survive in one fashion or another, particularly if they get community support. But if they become too disruptive or too obstreperous—or you know, too effective—they're likely to be kicked out. The standard thing, though, is that they won't make it within the institutions in the first place, particularly if they were that way when they were young—they'll simply be weeded out somewhere along the line. So in most cases, the people who make it through the institutions and are able to remain in them have already internalized the

right kinds of beliefs: it's not a problem for them to be obedient, they already are obedient, that's how they got there. And that's pretty much how the ideological control system perpetuates itself in the schools—that's the basic story of how it operates, I think.

Forging Working-Class Culture

MAN: Noam, I want to turn for a moment to people who weren't sent through the ideological control system of the schools, to see what kind of independent minds people today should be struggling to foster. I've often heard you talk about the insights that guided the early labor movement in the United States at the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 1820s. You say that social movements today are going to have to start by regaining some of that understanding. My question is, who were those people exactly—was it mostly European immigrants to the United States?

No, it's what were called at the time the "Lowell mill-girls"—meaning young women who came off the farms to work in factories. In fact, a good deal of the labor organizing in the nineteenth century in the United States was done by women, because just like today in the Third World, it was assumed that the most docile and controllable segment of the workforce was women—so therefore they were the most exploited.

Remember, the early industrial revolution was built on textiles. It took off around here—it was in Lowell and Lawrence [Massachusetts], places like that. And very extensively the labor force was made up of women. In fact, some of the main labor journals at the time were edited by women, and they were young women mostly. And they were people who wanted to read, they wanted to learn, they wanted to study—that was just considered normal by working people back then. And they wanted to have free lives. In fact, many of them didn't work in the mills for very long—they'd work there for a couple years, then go back to some other life. But in the early stages of the American labor movement, it was the Lowell mill-girls, or farmers who were being driven off their farms by industry, who were the ones who built up the early working-class culture.

When the big waves of European immigrants began to arrive in the United States, the story started to change a bit, actually. See, the major wave of immigration to the United States happened around the middle of the nineteenth century, and the immigrants who were arriving were fleeing from extremely impoverished parts of Europe—like Ireland, for example. That was at the time of the Irish famine [of 1846–51], and Ireland was being absolutely devastated by it, so a lot of people just escaped to North America if they could.

People often forget, Ireland's the oldest colony in the world: it could have been a rich place, just like England, but it's been a colony for 800

years, and it's one of the few parts of the world that was not only underdeveloped, like most colonies, but also *depopulated*—Ireland now has about half the population it had in the early nineteenth century, in fact. And the Irish famine was an economists' famine—Ireland was actually exporting food to England during the famine, because the sacred principles of Political Economy said that that's the way it has to be: if there's a better market for it in England, that's where the food has to go, and you certainly couldn't send food to Ireland, because that would have interfered with the market.²⁸

So there was mass starvation taking place in Ireland, and the Irish immigrants who were coming to the United States were desperate for work, so they could be forced to work for essentially nothing—the same was also true of a lot of the people who were coming here from Southern and Eastern Europe. And that undercut the early labor movement to a significant extent—I mean, the Lowell mill-girls could not, or would not, work at the level of the millions of immigrants who were coming in. So it took a long time before you started to get the growth of labor organizing here again, because the domestic workforce could just be displaced whenever it started to protest.

And the poor immigrants who came here were treated like dogs—I mean, miserably treated. So for example, Irish women were used for experimentation in Mengele-style experiments in the United States in the nineteenth century [Mengele was a Nazi doctor who "experimented" on live human beings]. That's not a joke—gynecological surgery was literally developed by Mengeles, who used subjects like indigent Irish women or slaves, and just subjected them to experiment after experiment, like thirty experiments, to try to figure out how to make the procedures work. In fact, doctors exactly like Joseph Mengele were *honored* for that in the United States—you still see their pictures up on the walls in medical schools.²⁹

So it wasn't a European input that brought about the American labor movement, quite the opposite. But I mean, these were just natural reactions: you didn't have to have any training to understand these things, you didn't have to read Marx or anything like that. It's just degrading to have to follow orders, and to be stuck in a place where you slave for twelve hours a day, then go to a dormitory where they watch your morals and so on—which is what it was like. People simply regarded that as degrading.

It was the same with craftsmen, people who had been self-employed and were now being forced into the factories—they wanted to be able to run their own lives. I mean, shoemakers would hire people to read to them while they were working—and that didn't mean read Stephen King or something, it meant read real stuff. These were people who had libraries, and they wanted to live lives, they wanted to control their own work—but they were being forced into shoe-manufacturing plants in places like Lowell where they were treated, not even like animals, like machines. And that was degrading, and demeaning—and they fought against it. And incidentally, they weren't fighting against it so much because it was reducing their

economic level, which it wasn't (in fact it was probably raising it)—it was because it was taking power out of their hands, and subordinating them to others, and turning them into mindless tools of production. And they didn't want that.

In fact, if you want to do some really interesting reading, one book I would suggest is the first book of labor history that was written—ever, I think. It came out in 1924, and it was just republished in Chicago: it's called *The Industrial Worker*, by Norman Ware, and it's mostly excerpts from the independent labor press in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁰ See, there was a big independent workers' press in the United States at the time—it was about at the scale of the capitalist press, actually—and it was run by what were called "factory girls," or by craftsmen. And it's extremely interesting to look at.

Right through the nineteenth century, working people in the United States were struggling against the imposition of what they described as "degradation," "oppression," "wage slavery," "taking away our elementary rights," "turning us into tools of production," everything that we now call modern capitalism (which is in fact state-capitalism) they fought against for a full century—and very bitterly, it was an extremely hard struggle. And they were calling for "labor republicanism"—you know, "Let's go back to the days when we were free people." "Labor" just means "people," after all.

And in fact, they also were fighting against the imposition of the mass public education system—and rightly, because they understood exactly what it was: a technique to beat independence out of the heads of farmers and to turn them into docile and obedient factory workers.³¹ That's ultimately why public education was instituted in the United States in the first place: to meet the needs of newly-emerging industry. See, part of the process of trying to develop a degraded and obedient labor force was to make the workers stupid and passive—and mass education was one of the ways that was achieved. And of course, there was also a much broader effort to destroy the independent working-class intellectual culture that had developed, which ranged from a huge amount of just outright force, to more subtle techniques like propaganda and public relations campaigns.

And those efforts have been sustained right to this day, in fact. So labor unions have by now been virtually wiped out in the United States, in part by a huge amount of business propaganda, running from cinema to almost everything, and through a lot of other techniques as well. But the whole process took a long time—I'm old enough to remember what the working-class culture was like in the United States: there was still a high level of it when I was growing up in the late 1930s. It took a long time to beat it out of workers' heads and turn them into passive tools; it took a long time to make people accept that this type of exploitation is the only alternative, so they'd better just forget about their rights and say, "Okay, I'm degraded."

So the first thing that has to happen, I think, is we have to recover some of that old understanding. I mean, it all starts with cultural changes. We

have to dismantle all of this stuff culturally: we've got to change people's minds, their spirits, and help them recover what was common understanding in a more civilized period, like a century ago on the shop floors of Lowell. If that kind of understanding could be natural among a huge part of the general population in the nineteenth century, it can be natural again today. And it's something we've really got to work on now.

The Fraud of Modern Economics

MAN: Noam, you mentioned Ireland being forced to export food to England during the Irish famine because of the supposed demands of the free market. How exactly did that kind of "free market" economic thinking get instituted as legitimate in the universities and in the popular ideology as a whole over the years—for instance, the work of the Social Darwinists [who claimed that natural selection and "survival of the fittest" determine individual and societal wealth], and of Malthus [early-nineteenth-century economist who argued that poverty was inevitable and population growth should be checked by famine, war, and disease], and others who in various ways blamed the poor for being poor?

Malthus gets kind of a bad press, actually: he's singled out as the guy who said that people should just be left to starve if they can't support themselves—but really that was pretty much the line of classical economics in general. In fact, Malthus was one of the founders of classical economics, right alongside of guys like David Ricardo.

Malthus's point was basically this: if you don't have independent wealth, and you can't sell your labor on the market at a level at which you can survive, then you have no right being here—go to the workhouse prison or go somewhere else. And in those days, "go somewhere else" meant go to North America, or to Australia, and so on. Now, he wasn't saying it was anyone's fault if they were poor and had to remove themselves; he was saying, it's a law of nature that this is the way it has to be.³² Ricardo in fact said that it was true at the level of "the principle of gravitation"—and of course, to try to interfere with a law of nature like that only makes things worse.³³

So what both Malthus and Ricardo were arguing, sort of in parallel, was that you only harm the poor by making them believe that they have rights other than what they can win on the market, like a basic right to live, because that kind of right interferes with the market, and with efficiency, and with growth and so on—so ultimately people will just be worse off if you try to recognize them. And as you suggest, those ideas are basically still taught today—I don't think the free-market ideology that's taught in university economics departments right now is very much different. Sure, you have more mathematical formulas and so on today, but really it's pretty much the same story.