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Noam Chomsky interviewed by Eva Golinger

A Revolution Is Just Below the Surface

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– **EVA:** I read a quote of yours which said power is always illegitimate unless it proves itself to be legitimate. So in Venezuela right now we are in the process of Constitutional reform. And within that reform the People's Power is going to gain Constitutional rank, above in fact all the other state powers, the executive, legislative and judicial powers, and in Venezuela we also have the electoral and the citizen's power. Would this be an example of power becoming legitimate? A people's power? And could this change the way power is viewed? And change the face of Latin America considering that the Bolivarian Revolution is having such an influence over other countries in the region?

– **CHOMSKY:** Your word, the word "could", is the right word. Yes it "could", but it depends how it is implemented. In principle it seems to be a very powerful and persuasive conception, but everything always depends on implementation. If there is really authentic popular participation in the decision-making and the free association of communities, yeah, that could be tremendously important. In fact that's essentially the traditional anarchist ideal. That's what was realized the only time for about a year in Spain in 1936 before it was crushed by outside forces, in fact all outside forces, Stalinist Russia, Hitler in Germany, Mussolini's fascism and the Western democracies cooperated in crushing it. They were all afraid of it. But that was something like what you are describing, and if it can function and survive and really disperse power down to participants and their communities, it could be extremely important.

– **EVA:** Do you think it's just an idealist illusion or can it really be manifested?

– **CHOMSKY:** I think it can. It's usually crushed by outside force because it's considered so dangerous...

– **EVA:** But in this case when it's the government who's promoting it? The state who's promoting it?

– **CHOMSKY:** That's what going to be the crucial question. Is it coming from the State or is it coming from the people? Now, maybe it can be initiated from the State, but unless the energy is really coming from the population itself, it's very likely to fall into some sort of top-down directed pattern, and that's the real question. In Spain in 1936, the reason for the very substantial success is because it was popular - it's a quite different situation from Venezuela. In Spain, the anarchist tradition was very deeply rooted. There had been 50 years of education, experiments, efforts which were crushed, I mean it was in people's minds. So when the opportunity came they were developing what was already in their minds, what they had tried to do many times, it wasn't spontaneous, it was the result of decades of education, organizing and activism on the ground. Now Venezuela is a different situation, it's being initiated from above, and the question is can that lead to direct popular participation and innovative and energy and so on. That's a real historical experiment, I don't know the answer.

– **EVA:** I think it's a combination because the reason that the coup against Chávez was overthrown was because of the people's power...

– **CHOMSKY:** That's right

– **EVA:** It's just been unstructured and very spontaneous, so the idea behind this is to somehow structure that, and I question from that same anarchist perspective, if you structure that power will it....

– **CHOMSKY:** Take off...

– **EVA:** or become corrupted or illegitimate? Or will it Take off?

– **CHOMSKY:** Take off...That's why the comparison with Spain is so interesting because there it was coming from below, nothing coming from above and it was there because people had been committed to it for decades and had tried it out, organized and so on. There was a live anarchist tradition, actually there is a live anarchist tradition in Latin America but it's been repeatedly crushed, in Mexico, Argentina, Chile, all over, actually I have a book right over there on the desk on the history of Anarchism in Chile which is not very well known, so it's been there, it's hidden, but I don't think these ideas are very far below consciousness almost anywhere, including the United States.

If you talk to working class people they understand the notions. In fact it's not too well known but in the United States, there was never a powerful organized left, but in many ways it's one of the most leftist societies in the world. In the mid-19th century for example, right in the beginning of the industrialist revolution right around here in Boston, there was a rich literature of working class people, what were called factory girls, young women coming from the farms to work in the mills, or Irish artesians, immigrants in Boston, very rich literature, it was the period of the freest press ever in the country and it was very radical. They had no connection with European radicalism, they had never heard of Marx or anything else, and it was simply taken for granted that wage labor is not much different from slavery, and if you rent yourself to somebody that's not different from selling yourself. Actually in the Civil War in the United States, a lot of the northern workers actually fought under that banner, were against chattel slavery and they were against wage slavery. And the standard slogan of the people was "the people who work in the mills ought to own them and run them". It took a long time to drive that out of people's heads. In the 1890s there were cities, like Homestead, Pennsylvania, that were taken over by working class people with these ideas, and they're still there. You know it's kind of suppressed by lots of propaganda and repression and so on, but it's just below the surface and I would imagine that may be the same in Venezuela. These are natural beliefs and there's a possibility they might spring into fruition given the right circumstances.

– **EVA:** That's actually included in the constitutional reform as well, the concept of creating communal cities, communes, that are worker-run, and including the companies. It will be very interesting to see how it develops.

– **CHOMSKY:** It's very interesting

– **EVA:** And how it then would change the force of power in the region

– **CHOMSKY:** If it can carry out. In the past it has happened but it's been crushed by force and even here in the United States it was crushed by State violence.

– **EVA:** On the notion of "crushed by force and state violence", thinking of Latin America and the changes occurring, the influences of Venezuela, right now President Chávez is mediating the peace process in Colombia. One, how do you view his role as the mediator? And two, do you think that the US is really going to allow for peace in Colombia when there has been an expansion of Plan Colombia and Colombia remains the stronghold of the United States and its military force in South America? Would they react in a more sort of aggressive way?

– **CHOMSKY:** I think the US will do what it can to make sure Colombia remains more or less a client state. But I don't think the US has a commitment to the internal war in Colombia. They do want to see FARC destroyed. The US does not really want paramilitaries running the country and the drug trade, I mean that's not optimal from the point of view of an imperial power, you don't want to have para-powers carrying out State activities. They were useful, and the US not only supported them but in fact, they initiated them. If you go back to the early sixties in Venezuela, in fact in 1962, President Kennedy sent a military mission to Colombia, headed by a Special Forces General, General Yarborough, to advise Colombia on how to deal with its internal problems and they recommended paramilitary terror.

That was their phrase: they recommend "paramilitary power against known communist adherents." Well, in the Latin American context, "known communist adherents" means human rights activists, labor organizers, priests working with peasants, I don't have to explain to you, and yeah, they recommended paramilitary terror. You can look back and say that Colombia has a violent history, but that changed it, that's really the initiation of the massive state and paramilitary terror that turned into a total monstrosity in the last couple of decades. But although the United States did implement it and support it right through Plan Colombia, it's not really in US interests and the interests of US power systems for that to continue. They'd rather have an orderly, obedient society, exporting raw materials, a place where US manufacturers can have cheap labor and so on and so forth, but without the internal violence. So I think there might be toleration at least of mediation efforts that could curb the level of internal violence and control the paramilitaries who will be and are in fact being absorbed into the state.

– **EVA:** But Chávez doing it?

– **CHOMSKY:** Well, that's going to be interesting. In fact, it's rarely discussed here. In fact right now there are also negotiations and discussions going on between Brazil and Venezuela about joint projects, the Orinoco River project, a gas pipeline, and so on. Try to find some report about that here. People are afraid of it. The conception, or if you like "party line" on Latin America, has had to shift. Latin America has changed a lot, it's not what it was in the 1960s. For the first time since the Spanish invasion the countries are beginning to face some of the internal problems in Latin America. One of the problems is just disintegration. The countries have very little relationship to one another. They typically were related to the outside imperial power not to each other. You can even see it in the transportation systems. But there is also internal disintegration, tremendous inequality, the worst in the world; small elites and huge massive impoverished people, and the elites were Europe-oriented or US-oriented later - that's where their second homes were, that's where their capital went to, that's where their children went to school. They didn't have anything to do with the population. The elites in Latin America had very little responsibility for the countries. And these two forms of disintegration are slowly being overcome. So there is more integration among the societies, and there are several countries taking steps to deal with the horrible problem of elite domination, which has a racial component to it also of course, there is a pretty close correlation between wealth and whiteness all over the continent. It's one of the reasons for the antagonism to Chávez, it's because he doesn't look white. But steps are being taken towards that, and that is significant. The US doctrinal system, and I don't mean the government, I mean the press, the intellectuals and so on, have shifted their description of Latin America. It's no longer the democrats versus the communists - Pinochet the democrat versus.... It's shifted, now it's conceded that there is a move to the left, but there are the good leftists and the bad leftists.

The bad leftists are Chávez and Morales, maybe Kirchner, maybe Ecuador - they haven't decided yet, but those are the bad leftists. The good ones are Brazil, maybe Chile and so on. In order to maintain that picture it's been necessary to do some pretty careful control of historical facts. For example, when Lula the good leftist was reelected his first act was to go to Caracas where he and Chávez built a joint bridge over the Orinoco...it wasn't even reported here, because you can't report things like that, it contradicts the party line - the good guys and the bad guys. And the same is true in this very moment with the Brazil-Venezuela negotiations. I think they are very important. Colombia is significant. If Chávez can carry it off that's great for Colombia, but these other things are much broader in significance. If Brazil and Venezuela can cooperate on major projects, joint projects, maybe ultimately the gas pipeline through Latin America. That's a step towards regional integration, which is a real prerequisite for defense against outside intervention. You can't have defense against intervention if the countries are separated from one another and if they are separated internally from elites and general populations, so I think these are extremely important developments. Colombia as well, if it can be done, fine, reduce the level of violence, maybe take some steps forward for the people of Colombia, but I think these other negotiations and discussions proceeding at the same time have a deeper and longer term significance.

– **EVA:** Right now Chávez is in Manaus, just yesterday and today...

– **CHOMSKY:** Right

– **EVA:** Well, one of the tactics of US aggression against Venezuela and against the rise of a new leftism or socialism in Latin America is precisely to divide and counteract what Venezuela under Chávez has been leading throughout the region which is now resulting in sovereignty and Latin American integration. I guess to focus that question on a media angle, one of the other tactics of aggression against Venezuela and other countries in the region is obviously psychological warfare, on an internal level in Venezuela, but also internationally to prevent the people around the world from knowing really what's happening. Within Venezuela under Chávez hundreds of new community media outlets have been created. This has helped us internally to combat media manipulation from corporate media in Venezuela, but on an international level, we haven't had much advance fighting the war against the media empire. How can we do that?

– **CHOMSKY:** Well, the history of media in the west is interesting. I mentioned that the period of the freest press in the US and England was the mid-19th century, and it was rather like what you were describing. There were hundreds of newspapers of all kinds, working class, ethnic, communities of all kinds, with direct active participation, real participation. People read in those days, working people. Like a blacksmith in Boston would pay a 16 year old kid to read to him while he was working. These factory girls coming from the farms had a high culture, they were reading contemporary literature. And part of their bitter condemnation of the industrial system was because it was taking their culture away from them. They did run extremely interesting newspapers and it was lively, exciting and a period of a really very free vibrant press, and it was overcome slowly, most true in England and the United States, which were then the freest countries in the world. In England they tried censorship, it didn't work, there were too many ways around it. They tried repressive taxation, again it didn't work very well, similarly in the US. What did work finally was two things: concentration of capital and advertiser reliance. First the concentration of capital is obvious then you can do all kinds of things that smaller newspapers can't do. But advertiser reliance means really the newspapers are being run by the advertisers. If the source of income is advertising, the main source, well that's of course going to have an inordinate influence. And by now it's close to 100%. If you turn on television, CBS doesn't make any money from the fact that you turned on the television set, they make money from the advertisers. The advertisers are in effect, the corporation that owns what it is selling audiences to advertisers, so of course the news product reflects overwhelming the interests of the corporation and the buyers and the market, which is advertisers. So yeah, and that over time, along with concentration of capital, has essentially eliminated or sharply reduced the diverse, lively and independent locally based media. And that's pretty serious. In the United States, which has had no really organized socialist movement, nevertheless, as recently as the 1950s, there were about 800 labor newspapers which probably reached maybe 30 million people a week, which by our standards were pretty radical, condemning corporate power, condemning what they called the bought priesthood, mainly those who run the media - the priesthood that was bought by the corporate system offering a different picture to the world.

In England, it lasted into the 1960s. In the 1960s the tabloids - which are now hideous if you look at them - they were labor-based newspapers in the 1960s, pretty leftist in their orientation. The major newspaper in England that had the largest circulation, more than any other, was The Daily Herald, which was a kind of social-democratic labor-based paper giving a very different picture of the world. It collapsed, not because of lack of reader interest, in fact it had probably the largest reader interest of any, but because it couldn't get advertisers and couldn't bring in capital. So what you're describing today is part of the history of the west, which has been overcome slowly by the standard processes of concentration of capital and of course advertiser reliance is another form of it. But it's beginning to revive in the west as well through the Internet and through cheap publishing techniques. Computers, desktop publishing is now much cheaper than big publishing, and of course the internet. So the new technologies are giving opportunities to overcome the effects of capital concentration, which has a severe impact on the nature of media and the nature of schools and everything else. So, there's revival, and actually the major battle that's going on right now is crucial, as to who is going to control the Internet. The Internet was developed in places like this, MIT, that's the state sector of the economy, most of the new economy comes out of the state sector, it's not a free market economy. The Internet is a case in point; it was developed in the state sector like here, actually with Pentagon funding, and it was in the state sector for about 30 years before it was handed over to private corporations in 1995 under Clinton.

And right now there's a struggle going on as to whether it will be free or not. So there's a major effort being made by the major corporate centers to figure out some ways to control it, to prevent the wrong kinds of things from their point of view from being accessible, and there are now grassroots movements, significant ones struggling against it, so these are ongoing live battles. There is nothing inherent in capitalist democracy to the idea that the media have to be run by corporations. It would have shocked the founding fathers of the United States. They believed that the media had to be publicly run. If you go back to the...it's hard to believe now...

– **EVA:** Well, that's why the airwaves are public

– **CHOMSKY:** That's right, that's why the airwaves are kept public and it's a gift to the corporations to allow them to be used. But if you go back to Jefferson, even Hamilton, Madison and the rest of them, they were in favor of public subsidies to newspapers to enable them to survive as independent sources of information. Postal rates were set by the government in such a way as to give advantages to the newspapers so that the public would be able to have access to the widest possible range of diverse information and so on. The Bill of Rights, which technically established freedom of press, we can talk about whether that works, but technically said nothing about whether the government could intervene to support the media. In fact, it's not only a possibility but it's what the framers of the Constitution had in mind. Over the years, attitudes, the dominant culture, the hegemonic culture as Gramsci would have called it, has changed so that the idea of the corporatization of the media is sort of assumed kind of like the air you breathe, but it's not, it's a creation of capitalist concentration and the doctrinal system that goes with it.....It doesn't have to exist

– **EVA:** So, in that sense a couple of months ago the Venezuelan government decided not to renew the concession of one of the corporate media outlets for many reasons, tax violations, not paying social security for workers as well as being involved in the coup. Do you think that is a demonstration of the State assuring that those airwaves remain in the public sphere? And that is something that could be replicated in other countries or even in the United States, they didn't revoke the concession, they just didn't renew it.

– **CHOMSKY:** You're talking about the RCTV case. Well, my own view of that is kind of mixed. Formally I think it was a tactical mistake, and for another I think you need a heavy burden of proof to close down any form of media so in that sense my attitude is critical...

– **EVA:** But should corporations have a stronghold on the concessions?

– **CHOMSKY:** Yeah, I know, that's the other side. The question is what replaces it. However, let me say that I agree with the western criticism in one crucial respect. When they say nothing like that could ever happen here, that's correct. But the reason, which is not stated, is that if there had been anything like RCTV in the United States or England or Western Europe the owners and the managers would have been brought to trial and executed - In the United States executed, in Europe sent to prison permanently, right away, in 2002. You can't imagine the New York Times or CBS News supporting a military coup that overthrew the government even for a day. The reaction would be "send them to a firing squad" . So yeah, it wouldn't have happened in the west because it would never have gotten this far. It seems to me that there should be more focus on that. But as to the removal of the license I think you just have to ask what's replacing it. In Venezuela, you know better than I, my impression is that it was not a popular move. And the population should have a voice in this, big voice, major voice, so I think there are many sides to it. But it kind of depends how it works itself out. Are you really going to get popular media, for example?

– **EVA:** Should the concessions be in the hands of the people to decide?

– **CHOMSKY:** I think they should, yes, in fact in a technical sense they are, even in the United States. Take the airwaves again, that's public property. Corporations have no right to it, It's given to them as a gift by the taxpayer and

the taxpayer doesn't know it. The culture has reached the point where the people assume that's the natural order of things. It's not, it's a major gift from the public. In fact if you look at the history of telecommunications, radio and television, it's quite interesting. Radio came along in the 1920s and in most of the world, it just became public. The United States is an interesting case, it's almost the only major case in which radio was privatized. And there was a struggle about it. The labor unions, the educational institutions, the churches, they wanted it to be public, the corporations wanted it to be privatized. There was a big battle, and the United States is very much a business-run society, and uniquely, business won, and it was privatized. When television came along, in most of the world it was public, without question. In the United States it wasn't even an issue, it was just private because the business-dominated culture by then had achieved a level of dominance so that people didn't think of what was obvious, that this was public space that we're giving away to them. Finally, public radio and public television were permitted in the United States in a very small corner, because there had been public pressure to compel the corporate media to meet some level of public responsibility, like to run a few educational programs for children and things like that. And the corporations didn't like it, they didn't want to have any commitment to public responsibility, so they were willing to allow a small public, side operation, so they could then claim, well, we don't have to have any responsibility anymore because they can do it, and they don't do much of, they are also corporate-funded, but that's a striking difference between the United States and even other similar societies. It's a very free country, the United States, maybe the freest in the world, but it's also uniquely business-run, and that has enormous effects on everything.

– **EVA:** On that note, the theme of the Book Fair in Venezuela this year is "United States: Is a Revolution Possible?" Is it?

– **CHOMSKY:** I think it's just below the surface. I mean there is tremendous discontent. A large majority of the population for years has felt that the government doesn't represent them, that it represents special interests. In the Reagan years this went up to about 80% of the population. If you look at public attitudes and public policy, there is a huge gulf between them. Both political parties are far to the right of the population on a host of major issues. Just to take some examples; Read in this morning's New York Times, September 21st, there's a column by Paul Krugmann, who's sort of far left of the media, sort of a left, liberal commentator, a very good economist, who's been talking for some time about the horrible health system in the United States, it's a disaster, twice the per capita expenses of any other country and some of the industrial companies and some of the worst outcomes in the industrial world. And he has a column this morning that starts out by saying, hopefully, well now it turns out that maybe universal health care is becoming politically possible.

Now that's a very interesting comment, particularly when it's coming from the left end of the media. What does it mean for it to become politically possible? For decades it's been supported by an overwhelming majority of the population but it was never politically possible. Now it's becoming politically possible. Why? He doesn't say why, but the reason is that manufacturing corporations are being severely harmed by the hopelessly inefficient and costly healthcare system in the United States. It's like how it costs a lot more to produce a car in Detroit than a couple of miles north in Windsor Canada because they have an efficient, functioning healthcare system. So by now there is corporate pressure from the manufacturing sector to do something to fix up the outrageous healthcare system. So it's becoming politically possible. When it's just the large majority of the population, it's not politically possible. The assumptions behind that should be obvious, but they're interesting. Politically possible does not mean the population supports it.

What politically possible means is that some sectors of concentrated capital support it. So if the pharmaceutical industries and the financial institutions are against it, it's not politically possible. But if manufacturing industries come out in favor of it, well then maybe it begins to become politically possible. Those are the general assumptions, we're not talking about the left liberal commentary. I'm not talking about the editorials in the Wall Street Journal, that's the spectrum of opinion. Something is politically possible if it's support by major concentrations of capital. It doesn't matter what the public thinks, and you see this on international issues too. Like take what may be the major

international issue right now: Is the United States going to invade Iran? That could be an utter monstrosity. Every viable presidential candidate - not Dennis Kucinich, but the ones that are really viable, has come out and said yeah, we have the right to invade Iran. The way they say it is, "all options are on the table", meaning, "we want to attack them, we can attack them." That's almost the entire political spectrum, but what does the population think? Well, about 75% of the population is opposed to any threats against Iran and wants to enter into diplomatic relations with them. But that's off the spectrum, in fact, it isn't even reported. But it's not part of the discussion.

It's the same way with Cuba. Every since polls began in the 1970s, a considerable amount of the population wants to enter into normal diplomatic relations with Cuba and end the economic strangulation and the terror, which they don't know about, but they would be against that too. It's not an option, because state interests won't allow it. And that's separate from the population, and it's not discussed. Do a search of media and journals, including left journals and you just don't find it. Well, it's a very free country but also very much business controlled.

– **EVA:** But how could that change come about?

– **CHOMSKY:** It can come about by the kind of organization that will take public opinion - that will take the public and turn it into an organized force. Which has happened...

– **EVA:** So in the end you need media control?

– **CHOMSKY:** Well, that's part of it, but media control is in part a consequence of popular organization. So the media, take the Vietnam era, the media did turn into moderate critics of the war, but that was the result of popular mass movements. I could tell you explicit cases, one case I know very well was one of the major newspapers in the country, the editor happened to be a personal friend who was pretty conservative and became the first newspaper in the United States to call for withdrawal. It was largely under the influence of his son who was in the resistance, who I knew through the resistance activities, and who influenced his father. That's an individual case, but it was happening all over. The shift in the popular movements and popular attitudes led to a shift in the media, not a major shift, but a significant one. For one reason because the journalists are human beings and they live in the culture, and if they're coming out of a culture of criticism and questioning and challenging and so on, well, that's going to affect them. So there has been a change in many respects. Take say aggression. There is a lot of comparison now of the reaction to the Iraq war with the reaction to the Vietnam war - it's almost all wrong, there was almost no opposition to the Vietnam war. When the Vietnam war was at the level of the Iraq war today there was almost no opposition. Public protest of the Iraq war is far beyond that of the Vietnam war at any comparable stage. People have just forgotten.

There was protest against the Vietnam war by 1968, let's say, but by that time there were half a million troops in Vietnam. The US had invaded...and it was seven, six or seven years after they had invaded South Vietnam and it had been practically wiped out and the word spread to the rest of Indochina. It was way beyond Iraq today - then there was protest. The first call for withdrawal from Vietnam in the major media was fall of 1969. That's seven years after the war began. Now you get it in the New York Times, they don't mean it, but at least you get it. These are changes, and the same changes have taken place in many other domains. Take say women's rights, it's pretty important, it's half the population. Well, the circumstances are very different now than the 1960s. You can see it right at this institution. Take a walk down the halls and you'll see about half women, about a third minorities, casual dress, easy interchanges among the people and so on. When I got here 50 years ago it was totally different. White males, well dressed, obedient - do your work and don't ask any questions. And it's indicative of changes throughout the whole society. Well, those are...the solidarity movements are the same. When you have popular movements, they change the society. If they reach a sufficient scale I think they can challenge fundamental matters of class domination and economic control.

– **EVA:** Do you think the revolution in Venezuela serves as an example for people in the United States? That change

is possible from the ground up?

– **CHOMSKY:** It will if two things happen: One, if it's successful and two, if you can break through the media distortion of what's happening. Two things have to happen, ok? So, I mentioned that I was in Chile last October. The picture of Venezuela that is presented by the media, say in El Mercurio is about the same as it would have been in the old El Mercurio under Pinochet. So as long as that's the picture, that's the prism through which events are perceived, you can't have much of an effect. But if you can change the prism so that things are reported more or less accurately, and if what's happening in fact does constitute a possible model, if those two achievements can be reached, then yes, it could be.

– **EVA:** Would you give a message to the people of Venezuela? Anything?

– **CHOMSKY:** Yeah, make it succeed. The task for the people of Venezuela or for Latin America all together is to carry forth the programs of integration, of overcoming repression, inequality, poverty, lack of democracy, which is happening in various ways in different countries. Carry it through to success, and in collaboration and solidarity with people of the rich powers. Make it reach the point where it is understood there as well, that requires both sides, and they interact. Take liberation theology, it was mostly Latin America, and it had an influence in the United States, a big influence in the church and in the society, and the same can be true of other developments. There is a lot of interaction possible. More so now than before because of the existence of intercommunications and solidarity movements and so on.