

HISTORY IS A WEAPON

Excerpts from Understanding Power

by Noam Chomsky

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Something similar happened in the United States during our industrial revolution, actually. Mass public education first was introduced in the United States in the nineteenth century as a way of training the largely rural workforce here for industry-in fact, the general population in the United States largely was opposed to public education, because it meant taking kids off the farms where they belonged and where they worked with their families, and forcing them into this setting in which they were basically being trained to become industrial workers. That was part of the whole transformation of American society in the nineteenth century.

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So when you have a chance to meet with people or talk with them, I think the thing to do is to try to get them to learn how to explore things for themselves- for example, to help them learn for themselves the way that the media shaped and frame issues for the purpose of manipulation and control. Now, there's not much point in doing it abstractly- you know, like some theory of how it works. What you have to do is look at cases. So take cases that people are interested in, and just teach them how to do research projects- research projects are very easy to do, you don't need a Ph.D.; maybe in physics you do, but not in these topics. You just have to have common sense, you have to look carefully at the facts; it may be a little bit of work to find the facts- like usually you're not just going to find them right therein the headlines or something. But if you do a little work, you can find out what the facts are, you can find out the way they're being distorted and modified by the institutions. And then the purposes of those distortions quickly become clear.

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[I] wouldn't say that no meaningful work takes place in schools, or that they only exist to provide man power 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 went 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 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 teacher, "do this," which you know makes no sense whatsoever, but you do it, and if you do it you get thinnest 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 put: 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 get 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 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 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.

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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. That's ultimately why public education was instituted in the United States, in 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 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 wa growing up in the late 1930's. 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.

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