

Notes

Interview with Noam Chomsky on Racism in the US and Europe*

Mine Gencil Bek

Ankara Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi
Gazetecilik Bölümü

If only the people of the United States knew what their government is doing and the crimes it has committed, one might think, they would rise up and change it. But, in fact, even if they were to read all the books by Noam Chomsky and all the material released by WikiLeaks, they could still vote the same politicians back in power and, ultimately, reproduce the same society. Information alone is not enough (*Hardt and Negri, Declaration, 2012: 36*).

I have known Noam Chomsky's ideas since 1990 when I started doing a masters in communication. When I started teaching in 1999, I could see that my students were also amazed by his writings. He became a comrade of disobedient leftist movements in Turkey, as he did in many other countries. As a reply to the Turkish Prime Minister of the period (now the President) calling protesters at Gezi Square as looters (çapulcu in Turkish) during the protests in the 2013 summer, Chomsky supported them with holding a banner stating that "I am also çapulcu". Meeting this amazing person, critical academic,
•••••

* Bu görüşmenin kısaltılmış Türkçe versiyonu T24 haber sitesinde yayınlanmıştır. Bu makale *Aster(ix) Journal*'da da yayınlanmıştır

<http://ilefdergisi.org/2014/1/2/>

researcher, public intellectual and worldwide activist became possible during my stay as a visiting lecturer at MIT. The interview focusing on racism took place in his office on the 7th October 2014. We know that information alone is not enough as Hardt and Negri state above, but we will always need information from such a compassionate and determined scholar. If this information does not change the others directly, it can at least strengthen us in our struggle to create changes.

The US media coverage

- Q. *We have been in the US more than a year and following the media more closely during this time. We are surprised that we hardly hear the name of Turkey on the news. When there is a big protest or a catastrophe, yes, we hear. But other than that, nothing. Turkey is not important for the US media.*
- A. Not just Turkey. Nothing is reported here. For a couple of years, I went through the New York Times index just to see who was covered. The United States of course, huge amount on Israel, then Latin America and Asia.
- Q. *Then it is interesting that the TV correspondents in these days ask, "Where is Turkey"? They say "We were supporting them for a long time through financial aids and so on. Now this is (the war against ISIS) their war and this is not our war. They should be doing this not us".*
- A. It is typical of reporting Turkey, only so far as it relates to US policies. For example, in the 1990s when there were horrible atrocities being carried out in the south eastern Turkey, thousands of villages were destroyed, people became refugees, all the arms were coming from the US. The flow of arms increased. There was no reporting. The New York Times has a bureau in Ankara and quite a good correspondent there. There was nothing appeared about Turkish human rights violations. In 2003, something extremely interesting happened. The US wanted Turkey to participate the invasion of Iraq and Turkish refused. The government did not pay attention to the US, but simply responded to the population. 95 percent of the population was opposed. They were bitterly attacked here. At that point the press started to point Turkish human rights violations. Because Turkey did not follow the US orders. That is the way it works. That is reporting Turkey because it is not cooperating with the US coalition now.



- Q. Turkey accepted though this time to support the coalition.*
- A. Yes, but they are not enthusiastic, so they get reported...*
- Q. Turkish media and freedom of speech are in a very bad shape now in Turkey.*
- A. I first went to Turkey in 1999 to attend a court trial. A publisher published a book of mine. The publisher was brought to the court. I went to visit the trial and I insisted to be a co-defender in the trial. There was a lot of publicity on national televisions. I was interested to see how journalists wanted me to talk about Turkish atrocities. They asked things they could not report because it was the crime. But they wanted me to talk about on national televisions. So it was quite open.*
- Q. We were also more optimistic for a while. There was an opening.*
- A. There were lots of improvements and then that gets back. I think, the reason of this reversion is this. The EU made it very clear that no matter what Turkey does, they are not going to accept Turkey as a member. They keep claiming human rights. But every time Turkey passed some tests, nothing happened. The reason is that they do not want Turkey in the union.*

Forms of Race Discrimination in the US

- Q *With the Muslim population of course...Here when we watch the media, there are, of course, more qualitative reporting in the mainstream media as well. Not on Fox TV but in other mainstream media. But when we watched the Ferguson events when Michael Brown was killed by the police, there were racist connotations in the media. New York Times article claimed that he was no angel by emphasizing that he was using drug, had no success at school and so on. These racisms continue here. I personally think that if there was no organized anti-racist power, the organization and solidarity among them, protests, then things could be even worse. They would maybe continue more openly to make racist remarks and so on.*
- A. When you look at New York Times, they do report racism in the South, but not much racism in the North, which is more settled. Take Boston. Take a look at the subway system in Boston. There is the subway here, Red Line. Notice the route it follows. It goes to the edge of Cambridge. Why does not it go beyond to the Western suburbs? Thirty years ago, right in the middle of the talk on racism and segregation, there was a proposal to extend the Red Line to the western suburbs, Arlington and Lexington. They refused. Actually, I live there in Lexington. There are progressive, liberal, professional and academic towns. They refused the extension, even though it would have been enormous saving. It would have taken me 10 minutes to go to work instead of fighting traffic jams. Same for everyone else there. But they would not allow the subway to come, because if they did, black kids from downtown Boston could get on the subway and walk around Lexington centre.
- Q. *But what do people in Lexington think about it? If the people there are more progressive, did not they support that?*
- A. They do not talk about it. They think that it is just not polite to talk about it. That kind of racism does not get discussed. There is racism of other people, not us. It is the same with school busing. That kind of things is not reported.
- Q. *The food here is more industrial and unhealthy. Then again you see, for example, in fast food stores that the customers are mostly people of colour. They cannot afford more expensive and refined food. Fresh food is also expensive. That is also a big issue here.*

A. There is not a big black community in Boston. But if you go to Philadelphia; for example, there are miles and miles of places with Black communities. There is no supermarket. The supermarkets are all in white area. Blacks have to buy food from small stores, which have much higher prices. To go to supermarkets you have to drive, here, too. Supermarkets almost all are out of the city. These are forms of discrimination. Most severe are drug war which is completely racist. It was designed to be a racist war. It targets black males. Blacks do not use drug more than whites do. But they are the ones who are arrested. It starts from the police practices to all the ways to procedures. That is why we have a huge black population in jail. They started the drug war in the 1980s. It is essentially criminalizing black life. After the civil war, theoretically African Americans had rights... But when a Black was standing in a corner, he could be arrested if somebody said he looked at a white woman. He could be arrested with attempting to rape. They could not get out of the jail. Even though it was a 10 dollars fine, they could not pay. It ended up a huge black male population in jail. Then they literally became a slave labour force. The American industrial revolution in the late 19th century was heavily based on slave labour in the prisons. For the capitalist owners, that is much better than slavery. If the state maintains them, you get it free. Lots of industry developed with slave labour, black labour in prison. That went up until the Second World War. Then the couple of decades in the 1950s and 1960s with the high growth when a black man gets a decent job, unionized, they could buy a house, kids could get into the college. By the 1970s, it ended. We moved to a neo-liberal period. The unions were destroyed. Sharp cut-backs. Minimum wage benefits declined and pretty soon we had drug war, which reinstated what happened in the 19th century. The black males went back to jail. Hispanics too, but primarily black males. They work, but not get paid of course. This is 500 years of American history. First slaves came to here, Massachusetts, 500 years ago.

Q. *In the next decades the population statistics show that people of colour will be the majority in the US. Would it make a difference?*

A. No. Whites are becoming a minority. Hispanic population grows fast. Then Asian population and black population. Part of the reason of extremely reactionary character of the south and southwest is that people there recognized they are becoming a minority. They say so. "It is not

our country anymore. It is not White English Anglo-Saxon". Germany is the same. Did you read what Merkel said about the Turks?

Q. *Yes, we know about that.*

The Racism of Europe

A. They say "Look! They refused to have blue eyes, they cannot be assimilated." It is even worse in Europe than here.

Q. *We also felt the same, compared to our experience in Europe.*

A. I am not surprised. Europe is unbelievable. The most oppressed people in Europe are Romans. Discrimination against them is horrible. The people are Holocaust victims. They were treated the same with Jews, literally by Hitler. France was expelling them to Hungary and Romania where they were going to be killed. When you do [this] to Jews, [it] explodes. But when you do [this] to Romans, no one writes about it. It is the same with the Islam in France. It is shocking. In the suburbs where North African population lives, the racism they face is astonishing. I always felt that Europe is more racist than the US. It is more visible in the US because of the legacy of slavery, but in attitudes Europe is just horrible. It was not that visible in Europe because of a more homogenous community. Almost everybody was almost the same. As soon as immigrants come in, it becomes very clear. What happened in Denmark was striking. Remember in Denmark.

Q. *Cartoons against Mohammed.*

A. And there was a big uprising. The history is interesting. There is about 7 per cent Muslims in Denmark. That is a pure white Nordic community with 7 per cent Muslims. The Ministry of Culture made a speech. Shortly after that the newspaper published this cartoon mucking Mohammed. That had a reaction.

Q. *Was it like a provocation?*

A. Two years before, that same newspaper received cartoons mucking Jesus. They refused to publish it. That is the history. That is Islamophobia. But the way it was represented here Muslims are terrible, do not allow freedom of speech. The actual story is pretty much different. These days, it is not getting better either.

- Q. *What do you think about the use of digital tools by social movements? In the digital age, we at least witnessed Snowden in the US. In Turkey, corruptions were at least revealed on the web. Do you have hope about that?*
- A. It is double edged. It offers these opportunities also offers opportunities for white racists.
- Q. *Yes, of course, at the same time, does not it?*
- A. What is unfortunate is that people are drawn to positions very much like their own. Say *New York Times*. Yes, there is a lot of criticism. Nevertheless, when you read the *New York Times*, at least you get some range of opinion. When you go to the Internet, what people do is to go to exactly these places where their opinions are expressed. So if you are on the left, you go to *Democracy Now!*, if you are on the right, you go to *Fox News*. You just never hear other opinions. People are getting restricted to their own point of view, which gets enforced. Because that is what you hear.
- Q. *Pew Research Center revealed that there is a kind of spiral of silence about Snowden in social media. They do not discuss much. When they do, these are in places to get approved. No one wants to be outside the spiral.*
- A. Interesting! Here I did some experiments and asked what kids in the last generation see. How do they react? Most of them do not seem to care very much.

Reference

HARDT, M. ve NEGRI, A. (2012) *Declaration*. New York: ArgoNavis.

