

Noam Chomsky is an influential Linguist, Philosopher, Political Activist and Professor emeritus at MIT. I posed several questions to him linking the contents of the mural with contemporary political activities in Latin America namely Venezuela and Mexico. Chomsky was intrigued to learn more about the project particularly because the contents and episode was of interest to him however he declined to talk directly about the mural.

Interview Questions for Professor Noam Chomsky, Friday February 9th, 2007, 12:45pm to 1:45pm, MIT

BMW: It seems to be very clear that the circumstances that led Rivera to produce the unfinished mural are still very much alive. In Latin American new leaders are proposing alternatives to America's capitalist system with Chavez in Venezuela, and Morales, in Bolivia proposing, as Rivera says, a "High Vision" for the South of this continent. Can you talk about leaders such as Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and how they are proposing alternatives to Americas capitalist system?

Prof. Chomsky: First of all Chavez and Morales are demonized in a specific way in the US doctrinal system and correspondingly in Europe, but they are just part of a wave that is taking place in south America, they are in some ways the leading edge of it. In south America from Venezuela to Argentina, with only a few exceptions, there are, taking place, some of the most, I think, exciting, developments in the world. This is the first time since the Spanish Conquest, the half millennium, that the South American Countries are beginning to move towards some degree of integration, over many obstacles and plenty of problems and integration is a pre requisite for a successful move towards independence from foreign domination.

There are two fundamental respects in which Latin America has to work towards integration, both of them residues of the colonial conquests and the aftermath. One is that the countries have been separated from one another. I mean it's even true or transport systems and so on, very little interrelation among them. Furthermore there is an internal dichotomy, a very sharp dichotomy, one of the worst in the world, between quite small, very wealthy, mostly Europeanized, often white elite, on the one hand, and amass of the population, sometimes with extreme poverty, Indian, Black, Asteco, the

lines are fairly sharp, not rigid but pretty clear and the gap between them is enormous, it's the worst in the world, or close to it and that is also for the first time being overcome to an extent and one of the most impressive parts of it, is that its being overcome in many places, by mass popular movements. So in Brazil, for example, Lula came to the Presidency on the wave of an enormous and effective, popular movements. The landless workers movement, which is distinct from its workers party but is, loosely connected to the workers party itself, his actions have to a significant extent, disappointed them, but nevertheless he's a part of that system. In Bolivia, Bolivia had a remarkable democratic election, of a kind, that can't really be envisioned in the United States or any industrial society. It was not as December 2005, sharply distinct from the US election, a year earlier. The election involved mass popular participation, the issues were stark and clear and significant. People knew what the issues were. They didn't show up just on Election Day, they had been struggling about these issues for years. Control over resources, water, others. And they elected someone from their own ranks, an Indian, Morales, Evo Morales. And this is part of the Indigenous population has been extremely marginalized and oppressed, coalescing also across borders to a certain extent, there's talk of an Indian Nation. Again there are very sharp splits in the society but those are impressive developments and the US is very worried about them. For a long time the US has largely dominated the region and there have been two major mechanisms of domination, one is violence and the other is economic strangulation and they're both losing their effectiveness, because of the mass mobilization and the moves toward integration.

The countries are, as the President of Argentina, put it, ridding themselves of the IMF. The IMF is essentially a branch of the treasury department and they are moving towards economic independence, they are paying of their debts. In the case of Argentina and Bolivia with the help of Venezuela, Brazils doing it too. There's just a general loss of control. The US is reacting in many ways. A part of the reaction, to get back to your original question, is to try to introduce a sharp separation between the good left and the bad left. So the good left is Lula, Garcia, a couple of others, and the bad left is Venezuela, Morales, maybe Correa in Ecuador. Like all propaganda there's something to it, but, in order to maintain that party line its necessary to suppress a good deal of information consciously, for example, well the fact that when Lula was re-elected last October, his first foreign trip, one of his first acts, was to visit Caracas, to offer support

for Chavez's electoral campaign to dedicate joint Venezuelan, Brazilian projects and to discuss others. A couple of weeks later there was a meeting in Cochabamba, which is right in the heart of the Popular activist movements in Bolivia. A meeting of all the Latin American leaders, to discuss the move towards integration. There had been hostility between Garcia and Chavez but that was apparently overcome. None of this gets discussed. It simply doesn't fit the required picture. There's a lot more, but yes, Venezuela and Bolivia are, and they are leading the, Venezuela, in particular, the move, towards, some kind of hemispheric integration. How far it'll go is hard to say. There are many obstacles, both to the integration among countries and the internal problem of extreme wealth in a narrow sector and huge poverty, but it's much more on the agenda of action than it's been in the past. It's quite significant.

BMW: In Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos, and the Other Campaign are calling for an end to globalism. His group, the Zapatista revolutionary army who's name comes from the Mexican revolution of 1912, that Rivera once supported, are active in Mexico's poorest state Chiapas. They demand that the indigenous peoples of Chiapas be respected and their culture and tradition be fairly treated in a land governed by the Mexican and foreign companies. This is reminiscent of the 1930s when Nelson Rockefeller began to foster economic development in Mexico, and the indigenous peoples lands were being exploited. Later, another Rockefeller suggested that Mexico joined NAFTA (1994), a factor that eventually led many Indians to be forced off their traditional lands, face starvation, and migrate north to seek work in the United States. This country on the other hand is planning to build a wall on the border.

Prof. Chomsky: The Zapatista's appeared at the same time that NAFTA was enacted and they made the connection explicit. They described NAFTA as a step towards undermining the rights of indigenous people and also the Mexican poor. Mexico is like other countries of Latin America, a very sharply divided between a small sector of wealth, and huge poverty. The connection with NAFTA is clear, not only the Zapatista's appeared that year, but the same year, in 1994, Clinton had militarized the border, Operation Gate Keeper. Presumably the reason for coincidence of timing was that NAFTA created the expectation, widely expressed in fact, that it would undermine Mexican agriculture and Mexican manufacturing, small manufacturing. Peasants in

Mexico can't possibly compete with huge US agri-business, which gets maybe 40% of its profits from government subsidies. So they'll be driven off the lands and into the cities. Mexican small business can't compete with US Multinationals, which under the terms of NAFTA, have to receive national treatment in Mexico, they have to be treated like Mexican companies. Remember these are not free trade agreements; these are investor rights agreements, totally different thing. So the effect would be to undermine a good bit of the workforce in Mexico. The Campesinos and also the urban and that would probably lead to a flow of people to the north. Well that's pretty much what's been happening and now the Clinton's Operation Gate Keeper has now been expanded to a wall.

Immigration from south to north is not only Mexicans. But also many people fleeing from the devastation, caused by the US terrorist wars in Central America in the 1980s which practically destroyed four countries, killed hundreds of thousands of people and led to economies that can barely survive, without remittances from the north, so its another part of the flow and also from farther south so that's, all of those are connected, the alternative vision that is being proposed by the Zapatista's, by the Obrador opposition, is in some respect similar to the developments that are taking place in south America, the Bolivarian alternative for the America's, the Venezuelan program, which is at the more extreme end, I don't like the word extreme of the spectrum of efforts towards integration and development. All of these are interconnected. They are not identical; there are different problems in different countries. There's the split between indigenous population and poor peasants is different in the different countries. It takes different forms and many other differences, but there's a similar picture. The picture is, we want to take control of our own resources, we want to take control of our own lives, we want real democracy in which there is real participation, we oppose the, there is almost universal opposition to the neo-liberal globalization, the investor rights model of internal integration, which has been a complete disaster in Latin America. The few who escaped it, escaped it by not accepting the rules. Chile for example where the economy still relies very heavily, not only on, export of primary goods but particularly of, export of copper, of which we're the major copper company, Phidelco, is nationalized, and is apparently very efficient and contributes far more to the state treasury than the private companies, proportional to its output, and so that's been part of the basis for Chile's partial escape to the effects of the neo-liberal program that also introduced the variety of capital controls and so on. But

pretty much its been true all over the world that the countries that most rigorously followed these principles, the so-called Washington consensus. The ones that most rigorously followed them are the ones that suffered the most. The countries that ignored them, like East Asia flourished during the same period. You see similar effects inside the United States, which partly followed the rules, very partly. So Reagan, for example, was the most protectionist President in post war American history, doubled protectionist barriers, introduced, escalated the extensive state involvement in the economy, of which most of the high tech economy rests in the United States, again escalated under Reagan, and the usual mechanism, under the framework of military spending. But nevertheless the effects are clear. The last 25 years in the United States, sharply differ from the proceeding 25 years. For the majority of the population real wages, family incomes have stagnated, sometimes declined, while extreme wealth has been concentrated in a very small sector. In fact a fraction for a percent of the population, which is the sort of neo-liberal move, also benefits have been cut and so on. All of these things are happening simultaneously, its not that somebody's directing a single program, but similar developments are taking place. Just where they'll lead you can't predict, but it is a quite novel and promising in many ways for those who care about the fate of the majority of the population.

BMW: Next week 7 Mexican diplomats will for the first time in Mexico's history, be coming to Washington to discuss policies on migration. This is a vital moment for both governments to consider a lasting collaborative effort for Mexican's, who, like in Rivera's mural, "Look with Hope and High Vision to a New and Better Future", on the other side. How may PAN and Republicans effectively work together on this issue?

Prof. Chomsky: The problem of, the question of immigration is a complex one, but it cannot be looked at, seriously, in isolation. There's a reason why migration's coming from south to north not from north to south. Similarly in Europe there's a reason why migration's coming from North Africa to Europe and not conversely. Now we all know the reason. It goes back into the history of the imperialist expansion and domination and control. That's very much alive. So take I say NAFTA again. NAFTA, the agreement that was passed and implemented was an executive agreement, the population wasn't in favor of it. In the United States the population was opposed and in Canada the

population was opposed and apparently in Mexico too. It was not a free trade agreement. There are highly protectionist elements in it. Many of its elements had nothing to do with trade, like national treatment for foreign corporations, and much else. In fact it undercut the development mechanisms by which the rich countries had become rich. The sort of tripartite component, so called, essentially eliminated or reduced the very mechanisms that the rich developed countries had themselves used. What's called the intellectual property rights is introduced a highly protectionist element that's for the benefits of major corporations, pharmaceutical corporations and others, and the United States can't really enter into a free trade agreement. The US economy relies very heavily on the dynamic state sector. I mean certainly everyone at MIT knows that, that's where most of our salaries come from. The state sector is the source, the primary source for innovation, and development research in high tech industry. That was the source of the development of computers, the Internet, civilian aircraft, lasers, by now pharmaceuticals. Almost anywhere you look there's a very major component. An economy that relies heavily on a dynamic state sector can't really ostensibly enter into a free trade agreement, and these are not intended to be free trade agreements. So in fact, the only accurate words in the phrase north American free trade agreement are, North American. Now there were alternatives suggested to NAFTA. They were suggested by congresses research bureau, Office of Technology assessment. They were suggested by the US labor movement, detailed proposals to have, they were in favor of a north American economic integration agreement but not the executive version of NAFTA, which they predicted correctly would lead to low wage, probably low growth economies with low wage, high profit, but the economies harming the majority of the population. They proposed an alternative which, in fact some ideas from the European Union, and other proposals which they felt, and plausibly, I think, would lead to a high wage, high growth, high productivity economy. Well that was, I can't even say it was rejected, but it wasn't even considered. The proposals of congresses research bureau and of the labor movement weren't even reported. I had to do a research project even to find them and they did not enter into the debate. So for example, one of their proposals, borrowed from the European Union experience was to have a preliminary period before integration of compensatory funding and development programs, which would narrow the gap between, Mexico the poor country and the United States and Canada, the rich countries. That was done in Europe, quite successfully so before the European Union was formed, the poorer countries that were going to be introduced, Greece, Portugal,

Spain, and Ireland, were given and still receive substantial compensatory funding to narrow the gaps so that when they were integrated into the union they wouldn't be a flood of cheap labor, undermining the living standards of Northern European workers. To a lesser but still partial extent that was done when the Eastern European countries were integrated. Mexico, the US, Canada's not an identical situation but similar thinking was proposed and developed and could have been implemented. But that's inconsistent with the goal of an investor's rights agreement where the concern is the concentrations of wealth and power, not the effect on the population. But yes that was an alternative and could have been developed and could be pursued and questions like that are at the heart of the immigration debate. You can't discuss immigration seriously without asking why the direction of immigration is as it is and can something be done to overcome that.

Castro & Cuba

BMW: Fidel Castro may be in his last moments of life, after nearly 50 years in power. How do you see this moment in US-Cuba relations? What will the end of his reign mean for building diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba? How do you see the future of Cuba? What will happen with Cuba when Fidel is gone? Without economic certainty, a large poor population and the end of Fidel, Cuba's communist regime may be ready to collapse, especially with Bush's obsession with ending the Castro regime. What will this end mean for the United States?

Prof. Chomsky: Lets focus on one part of the question that's of particular interest or should be to is what it would mean, what Castro's death would mean, with regard to establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. Well it's a very interesting question. It turns out that the US population is quite strongly in favor of establishing diplomatic relations, I think the latest figures are about, two thirds and in fact these polls on these issues have been taken since the 1970s and with some fluctuation its sort of hovered around the figure like that for 30 years. Now that's a very interesting figure, because people who say that in the poll are deciding, making it up for themselves, they didn't read it, they didn't hear it, nobody talks about it. We were supposed to regard Cuba as an enemy that has to be destroyed, not one with which we enter into diplomatic relations. And in fact, if, these issues were permitted to enter popular discussion the figures would undoubtedly be far higher, but it's not on the agenda. We don't enter into diplomatic relations just because the majority of the populations in favor of it. Incidentally, the same

is true right now with regard to Iran. About 75% of the population of the United States is in favor of improving relations with Iran, diplomatic and other relations with Iran and opposed to threats of attack and so on, but that doesn't enter into discussion. Cuba's a particularly interesting case, because not only is the population of the United States in favor of diplomatic relations but its likely there's substantial part of the business community is as well. Energy just to give one illustration, dramatic illustration, Cuba apparently has substantial resources of offshore Oil and the US Corporations, energy Corporations are interested in exploiting them. There was a meeting in Mexico City about a year ago of the Cuban representatives and representatives of Texas Oil Companies and also the majors to discuss these opportunities of US Energy Corporations developing Cuban Oil. Washington discovered that the meeting was being held in a Sheraton Hotel, which is owned by a US based corporation and they ordered the hotel to expel the Cubans not allowing them to talk to Texas Oil companies about developing joint resources. They'd like to do it the US. Agri-business would be interested in improving relations with Cuba. In fact a substantial part of the business world would be but the government and it's interesting in this case, because it a government that's closely tied to energy corporations, not a big secret, is blocking it, something similar is happening with regard to Iran. That relates to an element of international affairs, that in my view is not taken seriously enough. International affairs have a striking resemblance to the mafia. The Godfather does not brook disobedience even from some small storekeeper, its too dangerous, disobedience anywhere can spread. Spread the Castro idea and so on. So disobedience and successful defiance, or as it is also known in the internal documents, cannot be tolerated, people have to be punished, not the governments, the people have to be punished for successful defiance, and must be compelled to overthrow their own government, or else we'll continue to punish them. Even if the US population is opposed and even if the US business community is opposed. One of things that are most worrisome to the United States right now is the Venezuelan and Cuban alliance that's developed. If anyone believed what he or she read in their economics courses they'd be in favor of it. Venezuela and Cuba are each using their comparative advantage. Venezuela's advantage is its energy resources. Cuba's is what economist call, its human capital, highly trained, skilled personnel, a health system that has no comparison in the third world, teachers, doctors, nurses and so on, so they're exchanging them. Well that's what countries are supposed to do, according to what we're taught, but don't believe. Furthermore to make it even more

dangerous Venezuela is funding a Cuban program, called Operation Miracle, right now in the Caribbean, but might extend, to locate people who are blind but can be surgically treated so that they'll recover their sight. So when Cuban doctors, say go to Jamaica and locate such people, and bring them back to Cuba, where they get high level skilled medical attention and they come back to Jamaica able to see, well you know that has effects. Somebody in your community is blind and goes to Cuba and comes back and can see now that means something and its apparently the US and Mexico planned a comparable program to compete with the Cuba Venezuela program but apparently never implemented it. Well that's a threat too. Programs of that kind that are dedicated to the welfare of the population are very threatening for the imperial master and that become the background for the intensive efforts to strangle and punish Cuban's and now Venezuelans. So the constant denunciation of Chavez as a tyrant that doesn't permit free speech, and that is turning the country into a dictatorship and so on. I mean like all propaganda, even the most vulgar, there's an element of truth to it, but it's far from what we learn from mere inspection of the obvious evidence.