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Chomsky on MisEducation

NOAM CHOMSKY

Edited and Introduced by Donaldo Macedo

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BEYOND A DOMESTICATING EDUCATION: A DIALOGUE

Donald Macedo: I was intrigued some years back by a twelve-year-old student at Boston Latin School, David Spritzler, who faced disciplinary action for his refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which he considered "a hypocritical exhortation to patriotism," in that there is not "liberty and justice for all." The question that I want to ask you is why a twelve-year-old boy could readily see through the hypocrisy in the Pledge of Allegiance, while his teacher and administrators could not? I find it mind-boggling that teachers, who by the very nature of their work should consider themselves intellectuals, are unable or willfully refuse to see what is so obvious to one so young.

Noam Chomsky: This is not hard to understand. What you just described is a sign of the deep level of indoctrination that takes place in our schools, making an educated person unable to understand elementary thoughts that any twelve-year-old can understand.

Macedo: I find it mind-boggling that a highly educated teacher and a principal would sacrifice the content in the Pledge of Allegiance in order to impose obedience by demanding that a student recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chomsky: I don't find that mind-boggling at all. In fact, what happened to David Spritzler is expected of schools, which are institutions for indoctrination and for imposing obedience. Far from creating independent thinkers, schools have always, throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion. And once you are well educated, you have already been socialized in ways that support the power structure, which, in turn, rewards you immensely. Let's take Harvard for example. You don't just learn mathematics at Harvard. In addition, you also learn what is expected of you as a Harvard graduate in terms of behavior and the types of questions that you never ask. You learn the nuances of cocktail parties, how to dress properly, how to develop a Harvard accent.

Macedo: And also how to network within a particular class structure and learn about the objectives, goals, and interests of the dominant class.

Chomsky: Yes. In this case, there is a sharp difference between Harvard and MIT. Although one could safely characterize MIT as a more rightist institution, it is much more open than Harvard. There is a saying around Cambridge that captures this difference: Harvard trains the people that rule the world; MIT trains those who make it work. As a result, there is much less concern with ideological control at MIT, and there is more space for independent thinking. My situation there is a testimony to what I am saying. I have never felt any interference with my political work and activism. With that said, I don't mean that MIT is a hub of political activism. It still falls under an institutional role of avoiding a good part of the truth about the world or about society. Otherwise, it couldn't survive very long if it taught the truth.

Because they don't teach the truth about the world, schools have to rely on beating students over the head with propaganda about democracy. If schools were, in reality, democratic, there would be no need to bombard students

with platitudes about democracy. They would simply act and behave democratically, and we know that does not happen. The more there is a need to talk about the ideals of democracy, the less democratic the system usually is.

This is well known by those who make policy, and sometimes they don't even try to hide it. The Trilateral Commission referred to schools as "institutions" responsible for "the indoctrination of the young." The indoctrination is necessary because schools are, by and large, designed to support the interests of the dominant segment of society, those people who have wealth and power. Early on in your education you are socialized to understand the need to support the power structure, primarily corporations—the business class. The lesson you learn in the socialization through education is that if you don't support the interest of the people who have wealth and power, you don't survive very long. You are just weeded out of the system or marginalized. And schools succeed in the "indoctrination of the youth"—borrowing the Trilateral Commission's phrasing—by operating within a propaganda framework that has the effect of distorting or suppressing unwanted ideas and information.

Macedo: How can these intellectuals who operate within the propaganda framework get away with their complicity in the falsehoods they propagate in the service of the powerful interests?

Chomsky: They are not getting away with anything. They are, in fact, performing a service that is expected of them by the institutions for which they work, and they willingly, perhaps unconsciously, fulfill the requirements of the doctrinal system. This is like hiring a carpenter and, when he does the job he is contracted to do, asking how he got away with it. He performed as expected. Well, intellectuals provide a very similar service. They perform as they are expected to by giving a tolerably accurate description of reality that conforms with the interests of the people who have wealth and

power—the people who own these institutions that we call schools and in fact own the society generally.

Macedo: It is clear that intellectuals have historically played an inglorious role in support of the doctrinal system. Given their less-than-honorable posture, can they be considered intellectuals in the true sense of the term? You have often referred to some Harvard professors as “commissars.” I also find that term more appropriate than *intellectual*, given their complicity in the power structure and their functional roles in support of “civilizing values” that in many instances have produced just the opposite: human misery, genocide, slavery, and wholesale exploitation of the masses.

Chomsky: Historically, that has been almost exactly the case. Going back to the time of the Bible, the intellectuals who later were called “false prophets” worked for specific interests of those in power. We know that there were dissident intellectuals at the time who had an alternative view of the world, the ones later called “prophets”—a dubious translation of an obscure word. Well, these intellectuals were marginalized, tortured, or sent into exile. Things haven’t changed much in our time. Intellectuals who dissent remain marginalized in most societies, and in places like El Salvador they are just butchered. That is what happened to Archbishop Romero and the six Jesuit intellectuals who were killed by elite troops that [the United States] trained, armed, and supported with our tax dollars. One Salvadorean Jesuit correctly pointed out in his journal that, for example, in their country Václav Havel (the former political prisoner who became president of Czechoslovakia) wouldn’t have been put in jail; he would have been hacked to pieces and left by the side of the road. Václav Havel, who became the darling dissident for the West, repaid his Western supporters handsomely when he addressed the U.S. Congress a few weeks after the six Jesuits in El Salvador were murdered. Instead of showing solidarity with his comrade dissidents in

El Salvador, he praised and extolled Congress as “the defender of freedom.” The scandal is so obvious that it requires no comment.

A simple test will show how extraordinary this scandal is. Let’s take, for example, this imaginary case: A black American Communist goes to what was then the Soviet Union, shortly after six leading Czech intellectuals were murdered by Russian-trained and -armed security forces. He goes to the Duma and praises it as “the defender of freedom.” The reaction here in the United States among politicians and intellectuals would be swift and predictable. He would be denounced for supporting a murderous regime. Intellectuals in the United States need to ask why they reacted with rapture to Havel’s incredible performance, which is quite comparable to this imaginary story.

How Many American intellectuals have read anything written by the Central American intellectuals who were assassinated by U.S. proxy armies? or would know of Dom Helder Camara—the Brazilian bishop who championed the cause of the poor of Brazil? That most would have difficulty even giving the names of dissidents in the brutal tyrannies in Latin America—and elsewhere—that we support and whose forces we train provides an interesting comment on our intellectual culture. Facts that are inconvenient to the doctrinal system are summarily disregarded as if they do not exist. They are just suppressed.

Macedo: This social construction of not seeing characterizes those intellectuals whom Paulo Freire described as educators who claim a scientific posture and who “might try to hide in what [they] regard as the neutrality of scientific pursuits, indifferent to how [their] findings are used, even uninterested in considering for whom or for what interests [they] are working.”¹ In the name of objectivity, these intellectuals, according to Freire, “might treat [the] society under study as though [they] are not participants in it. In [their] celebrated impartiality, [they might] approach this world as if [they]

were wearing 'gloves and masks' in order not to contaminate or be contaminated by it."² I would add that these intellectuals are wearing not just "gloves and masks" but also blinders that prevent them from seeing the obvious.

Chomsky: I'm not so sure that I agree with this postmodern critique of and attack on objectivity. Objectivity is not something that we should dismiss. On the contrary, we should work hard to embrace it in our pursuit of truth.

Macedo: I don't disagree with you. My critique of objectivity is not meant to dismiss it. What needs to be interrogated is the cover of objectivity that many intellectuals use to avoid incorporating factors in their analyses that are inconvenient and may expose their complicity in the suppression of truth in the service of the dominant ideology.

Chomsky: Yes. The pretense of objectivity as a means to distort and misinform in the service of the doctrinal system should be sharply condemned. That stance is much more easily sustained in the social sciences because the constraints imposed on researchers by the outside world are much weaker. Understanding is much more shallow, and the problems to be faced are much more obscure and complex. As a result, it is so much easier to simply ignore things that you don't want to hear. There is a marked difference between the hard sciences and the social sciences. In the natural sciences, the facts of nature do not let a researcher get away so easily with ignoring things that conflict with favored beliefs, and errors are more difficult to perpetuate. Since in the hard sciences experiments are replicated, errors are easily exposed. There's an internal discipline that guides intellectual endeavor. Still, there is plainly no guarantee even the most serious inquiry will lead to the truth.

Let's return to the initial point: that schools avoid important truths. It is the intellectual responsibility of teachers—or any honest person, for that matter—to try to tell the

truth. That is surely uncontroversial. It is a moral imperative to find out and tell the truth as best one can, about things that matter, to the right audience. It is a waste of time to speak truth to power, in the literal sense of these words, and the effort can often be a form of self-indulgence. It is a waste of time, in my view, and a pointless pursuit to speak truth to Henry Kissinger, or to the CEO of AT&T, or to others who exercise power in coercive institutions—for the most part they already know these truths. Let me qualify what I just said. If and when people who exercise power in their institutional roles disassociate themselves from their institutional settings and become human beings, moral agents, then they may join everyone else. But in their roles as people who wield power, they are hardly worth addressing. It is a waste of time. It is no more worth speaking truth to power than to the worst tyrants and criminals, who are also human beings, however terrible their actions. To speak truth to power is not a particularly honorable vocation.

One should seek out an audience that matters. In teaching, it is the students. They should not be seen merely as an audience but as a part of a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively. We should be speaking not *to* but *with*. That is second nature to any good teacher, and it should be to any writer and intellectual as well. A good teacher knows that the best way to help students learn is to allow them to find the truth by themselves. Students don't learn by a mere transfer of knowledge, consumed through rote memorization and later regurgitated. True learning comes about through the discovery of truth, not through the imposition of an official truth. That never leads to the development of independent and critical thought. It is the obligation of any teacher to help students discover the truth and not to suppress information and insights that may be embarrassing to the wealthy and powerful people who create, design, and make policies about schools.

Let's consider more closely what it means to teach the truth and for people to distinguish lies from truths. I don't

think it requires anything more than common sense, the same common sense that enables us to adopt a critical stance toward the propaganda systems of nations that we consider to be our enemies. I earlier suggested that leading American intellectuals would not be able to name any well-known dissident in tyrannies in the sphere of our control, let's say in El Salvador. Nevertheless, those same intellectuals would have no problem providing a long list of dissidents in the former Soviet Union. They would also have no problem at all in distinguishing lies from truth and recognizing the distortions and perversions that are used to protect the population from the truth in enemy regimes. The critical skills they use in unmasking the falsehoods propagated in what they call "rogue" nations disappear when criticism of our own government and the tyrannies that we support are in order. The educated classes have mostly supported the propaganda apparatus throughout history, and when deviation from doctrinal purity is suppressed or marginalized, the propaganda machine generally enjoys great success. This was well understood by Hitler and Stalin, and to this day both closed and open societies pursue and reward the complicity of the educated class.

The educated class has been called a "specialized class," a small group of people who analyze, execute, make decisions, and run things in the political, economic, and ideological systems. The specialized class is generally a small percentage of the population; they have to be protected from the mass of the population whom Walter Lippmann called the "bewildered herd." This specialized class carries out the "executive functions," which means they do the thinking and planning and understand the "common interests," by which they mean the interests of the business class. The large majority of people, the "bewildered herd," are to function in our democracy as "spectators," not as "participants in action," according to the liberal democratic credo that Lippmann articulates clearly. In our democracy, every so often the members of the "bewildered herd" are allowed to participate in

endorsing a leader through what is called "election." But once they endorse one or another member of the specialized class, they have to retreat and become once again spectators.

When the "bewildered herd" attempt to be more than spectators, when people attempt to become participants in democratic actions, the specialized class reacts to what it calls a "crisis of democracy." That is why there is so much hatred among elites for the 1960s, when groups of people who had been historically marginalized began to organize and take issue with the policies of the specialized class, particularly the war in Vietnam but also social policy at home.

One way to control the "bewildered herd" is to follow the Trilateral Commission's conception of schools as institutions responsible for the "indoctrination of the young." The members of the "bewildered herd" have to be deeply indoctrinated in the values and interests of private and state-corporate interests. Those who succeed in becoming educated in the values of the dominant ideology and who prove their loyalty to the doctrinal system can become part of the specialized class. The rest of the "bewildered herd" need to be kept in line, out of trouble, and remaining always, at most, spectators of action and distracted from the real issues that matter. The educated class considers them too stupid to run their own affairs and thus in need of the specialized class to make sure that they won't have the opportunity to act on the basis of their "misjudgments." The 70 percent or so of people who think that the Vietnam War was morally wrong need, according to the specialized class, to be protected from their "misjudgments" in opposing the war; they need to believe the official opinion that the Vietnam War was just a mistake.

To protect the "bewildered herd" from themselves and their "misjudgments," the specialized class in an open society needs to turn more and more to the technique of propaganda, euphemistically called "public relations." In totalitarian states, on the other hand, you keep the "bewildered herd" in place by holding a hammer over their heads, and if they get out of line you just smash them over the head. In a

democratic society you can't rely on naked force to control the population. Therefore, you need a greater reliance on propaganda as a form of controlling the public mind. The educated class becomes indispensable in the mind-control endeavor, and schools play an important role in this process.

Macedo: Your pronouncements suggest, and I agree, that in open societies censorship is very much part of the fabric upon which the propaganda and its attempt to "control the public mind" depend. In my view, however, censorship in an open society differs substantially from the form of censorship exercised in totalitarian societies. What I have observed in the United States is that censorship not only manifests itself differently here but also depends on a form of auto-censorship. What roles do the media and education play in this process?

Chomsky: What you refer to as autocensorship begins at a very early age through a socialization process that is also a form of indoctrination that works against independent thought in favor of obedience. Schools function as a mechanism of this socialization. The goal is to keep people from asking questions that matter about important issues that directly affect them and others. You don't just learn content in schools. As I mentioned, if you want to become a math teacher, you don't just learn a lot of math. In addition, you also learn how to behave, how to dress appropriately, what type of questions may be raised, how to fit in (meaning how to conform), etc. If you show too much independence and question the code of your profession too often, you are likely to be weeded out of the system of privilege. So you learn early on that to succeed you must serve the interests of the doctrinal system. You have to keep quiet and instill your students with the beliefs and doctrines that will serve the interests of those who have real power. The business class and their private interests are represented by the state-corporate nexus. But schools are by no means the only instrument of

indoctrination. Other institutions work in tandem to reinforce the indoctrination process. Let's take what we are fed by television. We are offered to watch a string of empty-minded shows that are designed as entertainment but function to distract people from understanding their real problems or identifying the sources of their problems. Instead, those mindless shows socialize the viewer to become a passive consumer. One way to deal with an unfulfilled life is to buy more and more stuff. The shows exploit people's emotional needs and keep them disconnected from the needs of others. As public spaces are more and more dismantled, schools and the relatively few public spaces left work to make people good consumers.

Macedo: This fits with the overcelebration of individualism.

Chomsky: I don't agree. I don't see it as a form of individualism. Individualism, at its best, requires some form of responsibility for one's action. This mindless form of entertainment encourages people to conform and to be guided mostly by emotion and impulse. The impulse is to consume more, to be good consumers. In this sense, the media, the schools, and popular culture are divided into those who have rationality, and are the planners and the decision makers in the society, and the rest of the people. And to be successful, those who have rationality and join the specialized class have to create "necessary illusions" and "emotionally potent oversimplifications," in Reinhold Niebuhr's words, to keep the "bewildered herd"—the naive simpleton—from being bothered with the complexity of real problems that they couldn't solve anyway. The goal is to keep people isolated from real issues and from each other. Any attempt to organize or to establish links with a collective has to be squashed. As in the totalitarian states, censorship is very real in open societies, though it takes different forms. Questions that are offensive and embarrassing to the doctrinal system are off-limits. Information that is inconvenient is suppressed. You don't have

to look very far to reach this conclusion; you just have to honestly analyze what gets reported in the media and what is left out; to try to honestly understand what information is allowed in schools and what is not. Any person with average intelligence can see how the media manipulate and censor information not to their liking. It may take some work to discover the distortions and suppression of information. All you need is the desire to learn the truth.

There is no reason why the intellectuals shouldn't be able to take the same stance toward our protectorates in Latin America as they do toward enemy domains. All it takes is the willingness to use the same intelligence and common sense as they do in analyzing and dissecting atrocities committed by our enemies. If the schools were serving the general public, they would be providing people with techniques of self-defense, but this would mean teaching the truth about the world and society. They would be devoting themselves with great energy and application to precisely the kinds of things we're discussing, so that people growing up in an open and democratic society would develop techniques of self-defense against not only the propaganda apparatus in state-controlled totalitarian societies but also the privatized system of propaganda, which includes the schools, the media, the agenda-setting press, and intellectual journals and which essentially controls the educational enterprise. Those who exercise control over the educational apparatus should be referred to as a class of "commissars." Commissars are the intellectuals who work primarily to reproduce, legitimate, and maintain the dominant social order from which they reap benefits. Real intellectuals have the obligation to seek and tell the truth about things that are important, things that matter. This point is not lost on Western intellectuals, who have no problem applying elementary moral principles in cases that involve official enemies.

Macedo: This is a form of selective moralism. Participating in this selective moralism also provides these commissars

with the rationale to justify their complicity in what Theodor Adorno referred to as "a callous refusal to see." I lived under two very different dictatorships, those of Antonio Salazar in Portugal and Francisco Franco in Spain, and censorship in these totalitarian regimes was naked, unmistakable, and police controlled. My experience here in the U.S. democracy is that censorship is much more diffuse and often exercised subliminally or through colleagues (including students) in the work context.

Speaking of democracy, isn't it ironic that in the United States—a country that prides itself on being the first and most democratic society in the First World—schools remain extremely undemocratic? They remain undemocratic not only in terms of their governance structures (for example, principals are appointed and not elected) but also as sites that reproduce the dominant ideology, which in turn discourages independent and critical thinking. Given the undemocratic nature of schools, how can education stimulate critical thinking in terms of students' creativity, curiosity, and needs?

Chomsky: There were alternatives to the present undemocratic schooling you just mentioned. I, for one, was very lucky to have gone to a school based on democratic ideals, where the influence of John Dewey's ideas was very much felt and where children were encouraged to study and investigate as a process of discovering the truth for themselves. Any school that has to impose the teaching of democracy is already suspect. The less democratic schools are, the more they need to teach about democratic ideals. If schools were really democratic, in the sense of providing opportunities for children to experience democracy through practice, they wouldn't feel the need to indoctrinate them with platitudes about democracy. Again, I feel lucky that my school experience was not based on memorizing falsehoods about how wonderful our democracy was. The influence of Dewey did not extend across all schools, even though he was a leading

figure of North American liberalism and one of the major twentieth-century philosophers.

I also remember that, when I was a boy, I was a counselor in a summer camp, and I often witnessed the success of an indoctrination process similar to the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance you described earlier. I remember seeing kids getting really emotional, and some would even cry, when reciting patriotic Hebrew songs that they didn't even understand. Some of the kids would get the words totally wrong, but that did not diminish their emotional state. True democratic teaching is not about instilling patriotism or rote memorization of the ideals of democracy. We know that students don't learn that way. True learning takes place when students are invited to discover for themselves the nature of democracy and its functioning.

The best way to discover how a functioning democracy works is to practice it. Well, schools don't do that very well. A good measure of functioning democracy in schools and in society is the extent to which the theory approximates reality, and we know that in both schools and society there is a large gulf between the two. In theory, in a democracy all individuals can participate in decisions that have to do with their lives, determining how public revenues are obtained and used, what foreign policy the society should follow, and so on. A simple test will show the gap between the theory, which says that all individuals can participate in decisions that involve their lives, and practice, in which the concentration of power at governmental levels works to limit individuals and groups from running their own affairs or, for example, from determining the shape of foreign policy they want to adopt.

Let's take the present bombing of Kosovo and Iraq. The situation in Kosovo prior to the bombing on March 24 was terrible, to say the least. On March 24 the bombing started, and within a few days there were thousands of refugees driven from Kosovo and a dramatic increase in rape, mass killings, and torture—a direct and in fact predicted conse-

quence of bombing that was carried out under the guise of a humanitarian effort to protect ethnic Albanians. Well, it does not take much effort to see that a situation that had been terrible became catastrophic after the bombing, that an already horrible situation in Kosovo escalated to catastrophic proportions after NATO's "humanitarian intervention." Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, NATO claimed the right of "humanitarian intervention" to stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians. As we can see, the NATO bombing led directly to a radical increase in ethnic cleansing and carnage in Kosovo; it led to a sharp increase in the killings, the rapes, and the torture of ethnic Albanians, hardly a great surprise. In fact, NATO Commander General Wesley Clark informed the press at once that this would be an "entirely predictable" effect of the bombing.

If we were to apply the same line of argument that justified the "humanitarian intervention" in Kosovo, NATO should bomb other countries, Colombia, for example, and also one of its members, Turkey. In Colombia, according to State Department estimates, the annual level of political killing by the government and its paramilitary apparatus is about at the level of Kosovo before the NATO bombing, and there are well over a million refugees, primarily fleeing from their atrocities. Colombia has been the leading Western-hemisphere recipient of U.S. arms and training as violence increased through the 1990s, and that assistance is now increasing under a "drug war" pretext dismissed by all serious observers. The Clinton administration was particularly generous in its praise for President César Gaviria of Colombia, whose tenure in office was responsible for "appalling levels of violence," according to human rights organizations.

In the case of Turkey, repression of Kurds in the 1990s is far beyond the scale of Kosovo before the NATO bombings. It peaked in the mid-1990s; one index is the flight of more than a million Kurds from the countryside to the official Kurdish capital Diyarbakir from 1990 to 1994, as the Turkish army was devastating the countryside. In 1994 two

records were set: It was "the year of the worst repression in the Kurdish provinces" of Turkey, Jonathan Randal reported from the scene, and the year when Turkey became "the biggest single importer of American military hardware and thus the world's largest armis purchaser." When human rights groups exposed Turkey's use of U.S. jets to bomb villages, the Clinton administration found ways to evade laws requiring suspension of arms deliveries, much as it was doing in Indonesia and elsewhere. Again, if we were to follow the line of argument of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, cited by NATO as justification for bombing Kosovo, NATO would be more than justified in bombing Washington.

Let's take the case of Laos. For many years, thousands of people, mostly children and poor farmers, have been killed in the Plain of Jars in northern Laos, apparently the scene of the heaviest bombing of civilian targets in history—and arguably the most cruel. Washington's furious assault on a poor peasant society had little to do with its wars in the region. The worst period began in 1968, when Washington was compelled to undertake negotiations (under popular and business pressure), ending the regular bombardment of North Vietnam. Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon then decided to shift the planes to the bombardment of Laos and Cambodia. The deaths are from "bombies," tiny antipersonnel weapons far worse than land mines: They are designed specifically to kill people and have no effect on trucks, buildings, and so on. The plain was saturated with hundreds of millions of these murderous devices, which have a failure-to-explode rate of 20 to 30 percent, according to the manufacturer, Honeywell. These numbers suggest either remarkably poor quality control or a policy of murdering civilians by delayed action. The bombs were only a fraction of the technology deployed, which included advanced missiles to penetrate caves where families sought shelter.

Current annual casualties from bombs are estimated to be from hundreds a year to "an annual nationwide casualty rate of 20,000," more than half of them deaths, as veteran

Asia correspondent Barry Wain of the *Wall Street Journal* reported in its Asian edition. A conservative estimate, then, is that the crisis this past year alone is approximately comparable to Kosovo before the bombings. Deaths, however, are far more highly concentrated among children—more than half, according to analyses reported by the Mennonite Central Committee, which has been working there since 1977 to alleviate the continuing atrocities.

The U.S. media applauded NATO's intervention in Kosovo to stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians, even though the bombing tragically increased ethnic cleansing and other atrocities against them. But in the case of Laos, where we are directly responsible for the deaths, the U.S. reaction was to do nothing. And the media and the commentators kept silent, following the norms under which the war against Laos was designated a "secret war"—meaning well known but suppressed, as was also the case of Cambodia after March 1969. The level of self-censorship was extraordinary then, as it still is. The relevance of this shocking example is obvious. Whereas the U.S. media were exuberant when the International Tribunal indicted Slobodan Milosevic for crimes against humanity, Kissinger, one of the architects of the carnage in Laos, remains free and celebrated as an "expert" whose "views" on the Kosovo bombing were eagerly sought by the media.

In the case of Iraq the atrocities abound, with Iraqi civilians being slaughtered by a particularly vicious form of biological warfare. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright commented on national television in 1996, when asked for her reaction to the killing of half a million Iraqi children in five years, that "we think the price is worth it." According to current estimates, about 4,000 children are still being killed a month, and the price is still "worth it."

A closer analysis of the Gulf War unveils the same guiding principles in the U.S. "humanitarian intervention" or intervention to safeguard "democracies" throughout the world. The media and the educated classes dutifully repeated

President George Bush's line that "America stands where it always has—against aggression, against those who would use force to replace the rule of law," even though he had a few months earlier violated America's principles "against aggression, against those who would use force to replace the rule of law" when he invaded Panama. President Bush was then the only head of state to have been condemned by the World Court for the "unlawful use of force"—in Washington's war against Nicaragua. Bush's claim to high principle was a joke, since the United States wasn't upholding any high principle in the Gulf, nor was any other state. The unprecedented response to Saddam Hussein wasn't because of his brutal aggression—it was because he stepped on the wrong toes, as Manuel Noriega had done a few years earlier. Both are thugs who had been friends of President Bush. Saddam Hussein is a murderous gangster—exactly as he was before the Gulf War, when he was our friend and favored trading partner. His invasion of Kuwait was certainly an atrocity, but it did not come close to the atrocities he committed with U.S. support, and it was well within the range of many similar crimes conducted by the United States and its allies.

For example, Indonesia's invasion and annexation of East Timor reached near-genocidal proportions; one-fourth of the population (700,000) were killed, a slaughter exceeding that of Pol Pot, relative to the population, in the same years. Both the United States and its allies supported these atrocities. The Australian foreign minister justified his country's acquiescence to the invasion and annexation of East Timor by saying simply that "the world is a pretty unfair place, littered with examples of acquisition by force." When Iraq invaded Kuwait, however, his government denounced the invasion with a ringing declaration that "big countries cannot invade small neighbors and get away with it." The real concerns of U.S. policy in the Gulf were that the incomparable energy resources of the Middle East remain under our control and that the enormous profits they produce help support the economies of the United States and its British client.

Macedo: It is indeed a sad statement that although the facts that you have reported are so obvious, the U.S. educated class, with the exception of a small minority, was unable to make the necessary historical linkages so as to develop a rigorous comprehension of the world. Vice President Dan Quayle read the Gulf War correctly, if unintentionally, by describing it as "a stirring victory for the forces of aggression." President Bush became trapped in a similar Freudian slip during an interview with Boston's Channel 5 TV news anchor, Natalie Jacobson. Referring to the Gulf War, Bush said, "We did fulfill our aggression," instead of what he no doubt intended, "We did fulfill our mission." The seemingly mispoken words by both Bush and Quayle denude the pedagogy of big lies to the extent that their statements more accurately capture the essence of José Ortega y Gasset's proposition that our so-called civilization, if "abandoned to its own devices" and put at the mercy of commissars such as Henry Kissinger, would bring about the rebirth of primitivism and barbarism.

Your examples of the barbarism in Kosovo, Turkey, Colombia, and Laos point to the barbarism of civilization. In many instances, the high level of technical sophistication attained by our so-called civilization has been used in the most barbaric ways, as evidenced in the gassing of the Jews and the bombing of Laos and Cambodia. It is certainly not an enlightened civilization that prides itself on reducing Iraq to a preindustrial level—killing tens of thousands of innocent victims, including women and children, while leaving Saddam Hussein, our chief for war, in power.

Chomsky: It is widely expected that U.S. military action will leave Iraq's murderous tyrant in power, continuing to pursue his weapons program, while undermining such international inspection as exists. It should also be stressed that Saddam's worst crimes were committed when he was a favored U.S. ally and trading partner and that, immediately after he was driven from Kuwait, the United States watched quietly while he turned to the slaughter of rebellious Iraqis—

first Shiites, later Kurds—even refusing to allow them access to captured Iraqi arms. Official stories rarely yield an accurate picture of what is happening. Official stories also will not create structures to unveil the truth. An education that seeks for a democratic world ought to provide students with critical tools to make linkages that would unveil the lies and deceit. Instead of indoctrinating students with democratic myths, schools should engage them in the practice of democracy.

Macedo: It is unlikely that schools will stop indoctrinating students with myths since it is through the power of propagation of myths that the dominant ideology attempts to muffle the manifestation of a truly cultural democracy and maintain the present cultural and economic hegemony. I agree with you that schools should engage students in the practice of democracy. However, in order to do so, as you have pointed out many times, schools need to provide students with critical tools to unpack the ideological content of myths so they can begin to understand better, for example, why David Spritzler's teacher and principal, who had invested heavily in the dominant doctrinal system, went to great lengths to sacrifice the very principles of the Pledge of Allegiance in order to prevent Spritzler from living in truth, since individuals who want to live in truth represent a real threat to the dominant doctrinal system and must be weeded out or, at least, neutralized. Therefore, one should not be surprised that the teacher and the principal would try to stop David Spritzler from pointing out the hypocrisy and the class difference of our supposedly classless society.

Chomsky: The myth that we live in a classless society is a joke but believed by most people. My daughter who teaches in a state college tells me that most of her students consider themselves middle class and show no sign of class consciousness.

Macedo: The very academic discourse points to the lack of class consciousness. Whereas you find the term *working class* used in the media and also *middle class* (such as "tax break for the middle class"), you never see any mention of *ruling class* or *upper class*.

Chomsky: You will never find *ruling class* for sure. It is just suppressed. And working-class students like those in my daughter's class do not consider themselves working class. This is another sign of real indoctrination.

Macedo: The ruling elite, aided by the intelligentsia, has gone to great lengths to create mechanisms that perpetuate the myth that the United States is a classless society. With all the debate concerning the failure of education in this country, one variable that is never mentioned is class, even though class is a determinant factor in school success. Most of the students who are failing come generally from the lower class, and yet educators religiously avoid using class as a factor in their analyses and pronouncements. Instead, they create all kinds of euphemisms such as "economically marginal," "disadvantaged students," "at-risk" students, etc., as a process to avoid naming the reality of class oppression. And if you use class as a factor in your analysis, you are immediately accused of engaging in class warfare. You remember the presidential campaign of 1988 when George Bush berated his democratic opponent by saying, "I am not going to let that liberal governor divide this nation. . . . I think that's for European democracies or something else. It isn't for the United States of America. We're not going to be divided by class . . . we are the land of big dreams, of big opportunities, of fair play, and this attempt to divide America by class is going to fail because the American people realize that we are a very special country, for anybody given the opportunity can make it and fulfill the American dream."

Chomsky: Yes, it is a very special country if you are rich. To take only one current example, look at how the tax system is getting less and less progressive while enriching the rich through a large tax cut and through enormous subsidies that have been given historically to corporations. Bush is right in talking about class warfare. However, it is a class warfare designed to crush the poor even more. All indicators point out that child poverty remains very high, and malnutrition is getting worse under programs carried out to promote "family values." The assault on the welfare state is to further smash the poor, the welfare mothers, others who need help, while leaving intact the powerful nanny, subsidizing corporations with massive transfer payments. We do have a welfare state, but it is a welfare state for the rich. To maintain a well-functioning welfare state for the rich you have to have a highly conscious business class. The rest of the people have to be convinced that they live in a classless society. Schools have always played a role in keeping this myth alive.

NOTES

This dialogue took place in June of 1999.

1. Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985) 103.
2. Ibid.

2

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

The topic that was suggested, which I'm very happy to talk about, is "Democracy and Education." The phrase *democracy and education* immediately brings to mind the life and work and thought of one of the outstanding thinkers of the past century, John Dewey, who devoted the greater part of his life and his thought to this array of issues. I guess I should confess a special interest. His thought was a strong influence on me in my formative years—in fact, from about age two on, for a variety of reasons that I won't go into but are real. For much of his life—later he was more skeptical—Dewey seems to have felt that reforms in early education could be in themselves a major lever of social change. They could lead the way to a more just and free society, a society in which, in his words, "the ultimate aim of production is not production of goods, but the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality." This basic commitment, which runs through all of Dewey's work and thought, is profoundly at odds with the two leading currents of modern social intellectual life; one, strong in his day—he was writing in the 1920s and 1930s about these things—is associated with the command economies in Eastern Europe, the systems created by Lenin and Trotsky and turned into an even greater monstrosity by Stalin. The other, the state capitalist industrial society being constructed in the U.S. and much of the West, with the effective rule of private power. These two systems are similar in some fundamental ways, including ideologically. Both were, and one of them remains, deeply authoritarian in fundamental commitment, and both were very sharply and dramatically