Noam Chomsky

In Defence of the Student Movement

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT TODAY is the one organised, significant segment of the intellectual community that has a real and active commitment to the kind of social change that our society desperately needs. Developments now taking place may lead to its destruction, in part through repression, in part through what I think are rather foolish tactics on the part of the student movement itself. I think this would be a great, perhaps irreparable, loss. And I think if it does take place the blame will largely fall on the liberal enlightened community that has permitted a situation to arise in which the most committed, sincere, and most socially active of young people are perhaps working themselves into a position at the end of a limb, from which they may be sawed off at great cost to all of us and to society as a whole.

One development that makes me feel that this matter is of crucial importance right now is the rise on the campuses of a growing movement that I think is quite ill-conceived and that may lead to repression of student activism and destruction of what I deem the few possibilities for significant social change. I have in mind a letter (which I did not receive, though a number of my colleagues did) from the Co-ordinating Centre for Democratic Opinion headed by Sidney Hook and a number of other people.

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(The organisation is now called University Centres for Rational Alternatives.) The letter calls upon people to join this organisation, the goals of which “will be to defend academic freedom against extremism, to promote the activism of non-extremists in all aspects of civic affairs, to foster rational treatment of contemporary problems, and a combat attacks on the democratic process”, particularly “terrorist attacks and multiple varieties of putschism” such as at San Francisco State, and also “many other extremist resorts to disruption, intimidation and violence”, all of which amount to a “new McCarthyism of the left”. The letter speaks of the dangers of appeasing this movement, pointing out that appeasement is both “morally intolerable and practically disastrous”. And it says that “the main thrust” of the new organisation is to be “to protect and advance the freedom and democratic integrity of academic life”, to struggle against the “extremist challenge”, “to support the university as an open centre of free thought and speech — as a meeting house of many viewpoints — not as an enclave of enforced conformity or a totalitarian beachhead in a democratic society”.

It would be very difficult to find anyone who would reject these goals. It would be difficult to find anyone who would be in favour of a university that would be an “enclave of enforced conformity” or who would oppose the view that the university should be “an open centre of free thought and speech”. But in another and more serious sense it represents, I think, an extremely dangerous, even perhaps vicious development: no doubt inadvertently, but I think objectively. When I see things of this sort, what immediately comes to mind is some advice that A. J. Muste gave to pacifists about half a century ago. He said that their task is to denounce the violence on which the present system is based and all the evil, material and spiritual, this entails for the masses of men throughout the world. So long as we are not dealing honestly and adequately with this 90 per cent of our problem, there is something ludicrous — and perhaps hypocritical — about our concern over the ten per cent of violence employed by the rebels against oppression.

I think that’s a sensible remark. And in fact, even if the criticism of “McCarthyism of the left” contained in this letter and similar statements were entirely accurate, still I think Muste’s words would be quite appropriate. It would be surprising that that much attention should be given to this miniscule element in the problems of society and the problems of the university.

**The Dominant Voice**

There is another voice in the mainstream of American opinion that is becoming more dominant: the voice of people like Melvin
Laird, who has called for a “first strike” if the situation requires it. This makes us, as far as I know, the only country in the world where the Minister of War has come out in favour of “preventive war” if “our interests” demand it. And he is supported — I suppose again this makes us the only country in the world where this is true — by the leading military spokesman in the press, Hanson Baldwin, who has come out in favour of first use of nuclear weapons for what he refers to as “defensive purposes”; specifically, bolstering weak governments against subversion and aggression — where we decide, of course unilaterally, when this is taking place — as in Vietnam in 1964, when it appears a decision was made perhaps even prior to the 1964 election campaign to escalate the war and to attack North Vietnam. One recalls the rhetoric during the election campaign. This decision, whether it was actually made, was secret and private. It was a conspiracy, an illegal conspiracy to carry out acts of war that then were put in effect in February 1965. This conspiracy has not been challenged in the courts although it is one of very great significance, not only to the people of Vietnam but to ourselves, and although it violates domestic law insofar as international treaties are part of that law.

What are investigated in the courts are other sorts of “conspiracies”; for example, the “conspiracy” by Dr. Spock and others to challenge the illegal acts of the government. It is striking that the government made clear what it regards as the basis of the Spock conspiracy. It made this even more clear at the appeals level than it did during the trial by giving a list of “co-conspirators”, of whom I am one. The criterion that identifies this set of co-conspirators is precise; the people tried at the Spock trial and the co-conspirators happen to be exactly the group that appeared at a press conference, independently, to speak their minds, to say what they thought about the war and resistance. Many of them never met before or since. This was the only link between the people named as “conspirators” in the Spock trial.

I believe this indicates what is the real peril not only to academic freedom, but to the freedoms provided by the Bill of Rights. Even if one were to agree with everything said in criticism of the student movement, this criticism would, in proper perspective, be quite insignificant.

The dominant voice in American society, the mainstream opinion, is bracketed by people like Frank Darling, on the one side, and by people like Melvin Laird and Hanson Baldwin, on the other. This voice is one that was made explicit by Barrington Moore in
an article in the *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* in early 1960:

You may protest in words as loud as you like. There is but one condition attached to the freedom we would like very much to encourage. Your protests may be as loud as possible so long as they remain ineffective. Though we regret your sufferings very much and would like very much to do something about them — indeed we have studied them very carefully and have already spoken to your rulers and immediate superiors about these matters — any attempt by you to remove your oppressors by force is a threat to civilised society and the democratic process. Such threats we cannot and shall not tolerate. As you resort to force we will, if need be, wipe you from the face of the earth by the measured response that rains down flame from the skies.

I think if you observe American society, you find that this is its predominant voice. It’s a voice that expresses clearly the needs of the socio-economic elite; it expresses an ideology that is adopted and put forth with varying degrees of subtlety by most American intellectuals and that gains a substantial degree of adherence on the part of a majority of the population, which sees itself as entering or already having entered the affluent society.

This predominant voice is supported by a predominant attitude of almost total apathy that makes it possible for any atrocity to appear in the front pages as long as it is directed against alleged “communists” or landless peasants or something of the sort. And it arouses virtually no response, certainly no response commensurate with what is described. This attitude is developed from the very earliest years.

A look at the files of the New York Civil Liberties Union will explain very clearly what “law and order” means to the poor. What it means is permanent harassment by the forces of justice. You get a very clear picture of this in books by Algernon Black for example, or Paul Chevigny in *Police Power*, where he discusses no real atrocities but just the low-level, day-to-day harassment that defines the life of poor people in their relation to the forces of order. He does not mention events like the murder of students, events which lead to a great deal of sympathetic clucking of tongues, but do not lead to the formation of any national committees to defend the rights of students.

**University freedom**

I have up to now been discussing “the violence on which the present system is based”, to use Muste’s words. How about the other aspect, the 10 per cent, or more accurately, the 1 per cent or less of the violence? George Orwell once described political thought, especially on the left, as a kind of masturbation fantasy which the world of facts hardly matters. Unfortunately, there is
a good deal of truth to that characterisation. One of the Movement newspapers once carried an article by a very distinguished professor at Harvard, an old friend of mine who has become deeply involved in radical politics lately and who says that the “goal of university agitation should be to build anti-imperialist struggles in which the university administration is a clear enemy”. Now this man knows American universities very well, and in particular he knows Harvard very well. It’s very difficult for me to believe that he really thinks of Nathan Pusey as the representative of imperialism on the Harvard campus. In fact if that were true, things would be very easy. All you would have to do would be to sit in at the administration building and you would have struck a blow at imperialism. But it doesn’t work like that. The problem is far deeper. This is almost pure fantasy.

The real problem is that those who call for freedom in the universities are calling for something that exists but that is very badly misused. The universities are relatively free, fairly decentralised institutions in which the serious decisions, those that actually relate to the interrelation between student and faculty, to the curriculum, to what a person does with his life, the kind of work he does — those decisions are very largely made by the faculty and very largely at the departmental level. At least this is true at the major universities I am familiar with.

Of course, the temptations are very strong to make certain decisions rather than others. For those who choose to put their talents to the service of the powerful institutions of the Society, there are many rewards — or what might be thought to be rewards. There’s power, prestige and affluence — a share in the great project of designing an integrated world system dominated by American power, which many feel to be a reward. Those who make different choices can confidently expect a good deal of abuse and recrimination, perhaps the destruction of their professional careers. Hence, in one sense the choice is hardly free. In fact, the choice is approximately outlined by General Hershey in one of his most famous statements; namely, this is the American or indirect way to insure compliance.

But in a much more important sense the choice really is free. And the fact of the matter is, and I think one has to face this, that the politicisation of the universities and the subversion of science and scholarship, which is quite real, is the result of a relatively free choice by students and by faculty who have been unwilling to resist the temptations and to face the real difficulties of standing outside the mainstream and of rejecting the rewards, if such they are, that are offered by compliance.
Consider the problem of developing radical scholarship in the universities. This is a category I do not believe adequately exists. I personally believe that objective scholarship will very often lead to radical conclusions in the social sciences, as in every other field. One takes for granted in fields outside the social sciences that objective scholarship will often challenge the predominant framework of thinking. Only in the social sciences is this considered somehow the mark of an alienated intellectual who has to be dealt with by psychiatric means. But the fact of the matter is that the task of developing objective scholarship free from the constraints imposed by the American political consensus is quite a real one, and I personally believe that it will lead to radical conclusions.

The burden of proof is obviously on someone like me, who makes that assertion, who believes that objective research will support conclusions of a radical nature. And this is exactly the point that I want to stress. The failure to develop what might be misleadingly called radical scholarship, the failure to build it into the curriculum, this is by no means the result of decrees by college administrators or by trustees. Rather it results directly from the unwillingness of the students and the faculty to undertake the very hard and serious work that is required and to face calmly and firmly the kind of repression, or at least recriminations and abuse, that they are likely to meet if they carry out this work in a serious way. I would expect these to come not from the administration but rather more from the faculty, which may feel that its guild structure, the professional structure on which its security rests, is being threatened.

Particularly in the social and behavioural sciences, where theoretical content is virtually non-existent and intellectual substance is slight, the pretence of professional expertise is very often used as a defence against quite legitimate criticism and analysis. Here I think can be found one source of the abuse of academic freedom; namely, the restricting of those who try to develop objective academic scholarship that will challenge the prevailing framework of thinking in the professions and the conclusions that are often reached.

Possible obstacles

Suppose that these barriers are overcome — the barriers being, I think, the unwillingness of students to do the hard work required and the fear of the faculty that their guild structure will be threatened. Suppose that these barriers are overcome. Then it might be that the trustees and the administration would step in
to erect new barriers against the implementation of study and research and teaching that leads to radical conclusions and the action programs that ought to flow from honest serious research. However, this is only speculation. We do not know that the universities will not tolerate programs of this sort, both as teaching programs and programs of research and action as well, because the effort has barely been made. There are cases of administrative interference and they are deplorable, but it would be a great mistake to think that they constitute the heart of the problem. They do not.

I think it crucial that the effort be made. I think we very much need understanding of contemporary society, of its long-range tendencies, of the possibilities for alternative forms of social organisation and a reasoned, serious analysis, without fantasy, of how social change can come about. I have no doubt that objective scholarship can contribute to that understanding. But it is hard work and it has to be conducted in an open-minded and honest fashion. Furthermore, I think work of that sort has a political content almost at once and can strike directly at repressive institutions. To cite one example, there’s a group of graduate students and junior faculty in Asian studies at Harvard and other universities who have formed a Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars that is attempting to develop — I can only describe it in value-laden terms — a more objective and hence more humane and more sympathetic treatment of the problems of the developing Asian societies. If this attempt on their part succeeds — and I think it may, if it consists of solid and well-grounded work — it may seriously weaken one foundation stone of the national psychosis that plays a major role in promoting the garrison state with its enormous commitment of resources to destruction and waste, and its continual posing of the threat of nuclear war.

**Scientists and military work**

Let me mention perhaps a more important example, the problem of organising scientists to refuse military work. For example, consider the matter of the Anti-Ballistic Missile. Most scientists know that the ABM is a catastrophe, that it will not increase our security but in fact will probably endanger it by increasing international instability and tensions. But it is quite predictable that having given their lectures to the Senate committees, many of these very same scientists have gone to work to build it, knowing what they are doing. There is no law of nature that dictates that this must be the case. They can refuse individually; they can refuse collectively. They can organise to refuse. I think the real point is that lectures on the irrationality of the ABM, though
quite amusing, are basically beside the point if in fact the ABM is motivated not so much by the search for security as by the need to provide a subsidy for the electronics industry. And I think there’s very good evidence that that’s true. The fact of the matter is that — if I may quote from a paper given at the December 1967 meeting of the American Economics Association —

... the current proposal for an ABM system has been estimated to involve 28 private contractors with plants located in 42 states and 172 congressional districts. Given the political reality of such situations and the economic power of the constituencies involved, there is little hope that the interaction of special interest groups will somehow cancel each other out and that there will emerge some compromise that serves the public interest.

These interest groups are further specified as “the Armed Services, the contractors, the labor unions, the lobbyists who speak of free enterprise while they are getting a government subsidy, the legislatures who for reasons of perk or patriotism vote the funds”, and so on.

These are the political realities; they have not got much to do with whether there might be an accidental nuclear explosion or the chances of shooting down one of those Chinese missiles that Melvin Laird is worried about. Incidentally, I might add that the electronics industry itself is quite aware of all this. For example, there is a study of the Electronics Industries Association that discusses prospects for the future. It states that “arms control agreements during the next decade are unlikely. The likelihood of limited war will increase and thus for the electronics firms the outlook is good in spite of the end of hostilities in Vietnam”.

Scientists can organise to refuse co-operation with such projects, and they can also try to organise and to take part in the mass politics that provides the only hope in the long run for countering and ultimately dispelling the nightmare that they are creating. I think that if an organisation of scientists to refuse military work develops on any significant scale, then precisely because of the role that this work plays in maintaining the so-called “health” of the society, they may find themselves involved in very serious political action. I wouldn’t be surprised if they find themselves involved in what is called an “illegal conspiracy”, or a kind of resistance. In general, I think one can expect that effective politics — by that I mean politics that really strikes at entrenched interests, that really tries to bring about significant social change — is very likely to lead to repression, hence to confrontation.

Confrontation

There is a corollary to this observation: The search for confrontation clearly indicates intellectual bankruptcy. It indicates that
one has not developed an effective politics that by virtue of the way it relates to the social realities, calls forth an attempt to defend established interests and perhaps attempts at repression. One who takes his rhetoric at all seriously will work towards serious reforms, perhaps even reforms that have ultimately revolutionary content, and will try to delay confrontation as long as possible, at least until he has some chance of succeeding.

The search for confrontation is a suicidal policy. Now there is an argument for the search for confrontations, and I think one should face it frankly and openly. It's put forward clearly by people like — to quote a past-master in this — Daniel Cohn-Bendit. He denies being a leader, but was certainly one of the most articulate spokesmen for the French student actions. He has the following to say about “provocation”, about confrontation politics.

Provocation is not a weapon of war except in special circumstances. It can only be used to arouse feelings that are already present, albeit submerged. In our case (the student case in France) we exploited student insecurity and disgust with life in an alienated world where human relations are so much merchandise to be used, bought and sold in the market place. All we did therefore was to provoke students to express their passive discontent, first by demonstrations for their own sake and then by political action, directly challenging modern society. The justification for this type of provocation is its ability to arouse people who have been crushed under the weight of repression.

This is not an unfamiliar argument and one cannot discount it. But when we talk about the student movement in the United States, we are really not in any serious sense talking about people who have been traditionally crushed under the weight of repression. That's rather hyperbolic. And I think in the actual concrete situation of the student movement the idea of confrontation tactics is often a confession of the inability to develop effective politics or the unwillingness to do the serious and hard work of social reconstruction that can easily be condemned as “reformist”, but that any true revolutionary would understand immediately is the only kind of work that could lead to new social reforms, which might perhaps even pave the way for a revolutionary or far-reaching change in social organisation.

I think that confrontation tactics as they actually evolve are frequently rather manipulative and coercive and really the proper kinds of tactics only for a movement that, inadvertently or not, is aiming towards an elitist, authoritarian structure of a sort that we have had far too much of on the left in the last half-century and that in fact has destroyed what there was of a living, vital left in the Western world.

There is a confusion in all of this talk about tactics that ought to be faced more clearly in the student movement. I am referring
to the practice of counterposing “radical tactics” to “liberal tactics”. This is a senseless distinction. It makes no sense at all to try to place tactics in a spectrum of political judgment. Tactics are neither radical nor conservative, nor do they lie anywhere else on the political spectrum. They are successful or unsuccessful in achieving certain goals that may be discussed in terms of their political character. But to talk about the tactics as what is “radical” or “liberal” is to make a fundamental error. Part of the style of the student movement is to focus great attention on immediate concerns that are close at hand — what do you do tomorrow, how do you relate to the people near you, and so on. This is nice in some ways. It gives an attractive style to many of the student actions, but it can be politically quite destructive, I think, if it becomes the general framework within which the movement develops.

Any serious movement for social change will have to involve many different strata of the population, people who certainly see their needs and goals quite differently, including many groups that are in no position even to articulate their goals and needs, and certainly not to bring them to public attention or to develop political action based on them. I think that these may prove to be related and compatible goals — but of course that has to be shown.

The major task for intellectuals — including the student movement, which in large part has been the cutting edge of a growing movement for social change — is to try to understand and to articulate those goals, to try to assess and to understand the present state of society and how it might change, what alternative forms there are for the future, to try to persuade and to organise and ultimately to act collectively where they can, and individually if it comes to that. On the other hand, it is quite clear that if the adult community fails to act in some way to meet the real problems of the universities and society, if it contents itself with deploring the occasional absurdities of the student movement and various superficial manifestations of student protests, then I think we can expect with perfect confidence that student unrest will continue. Furthermore, it is right that it should continue. Those who deplore the forms that it takes, I think might do much better to ask what they can do to eliminate the evils that constitute the core of the problems we face, and then proceed to act in a serious and committed manner to confront these problems.