



دانشکده الهیات و معارف اسلامی دانشگاه تهران
معاونت پژوهشی



ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY LINGUISTIC THEORY & COGNITIVE SCIENCE



Noam Chomsky



Nadia Maftouni

**27 AUG 2021
9 P.M. Tehran**



An Intimate Talk Between

Nadia Maftouni

&

Noam Chomsky

27 Aug 2021



By FTIS International Affairs

Jan 2022

On August 27, the father of modern linguistics, Noam Chomsky participated in UT's webinar in an intimate talk with Nadia Maftouni. The transcript of questions and answers follows.

Maftouni: Hi Professor Chomsky!

Chomsky: Pleased to be with you.

Host: So, I would like to begin with one of the questions that I received before the session. Your view transcends the left-right dichotomy. One finds it hard in every country with free political parties to reach prominence outside of this dichotomy, even artists and academicians. How was it in your case that you gained such wide prominence without hanging to any one of these sides, but even criticizing them?

Chomsky: Well, my constituency, the audience I'm interested in addressing and becoming involved with is not the political parties. Those are representatives of power interests. It's pointed out years ago, the United States is basically a one-party state with two factions; the business party which has two factions, one a little more oriented towards service to business, the other little less,

and I'm interested in the general public which is not really... only partially represented by the party system. In fact there's a significant work in the mainstream of academic political science which investigates this question. So it's been found that it's a very easy question to investigate. You can ask how people are represented by the representatives they vote for. So, compare people's wishes, preferences, choices, with the votes of their representatives. Straightforward, we can find out about what people want by extensive polling which is carefully done, quite accurate, we can see how the Representatives vote. For about 70 percent of the population there's essentially no correlation, the lower 70 on the wealth skill. The representatives are listening to different voices, among them the voices of the donors for their next campaign. If you want to win an electoral campaign you have to have funding. You can almost, you can very closely predict the outcome of an election just by the concentration of the funding from big donors who the representatives have to listen to. So, it's not that the political system doesn't function, it does. There is an effective public opinion.

But the effect of public opinion comes from organizing and activism. So let's take the major issue that human beings face today. The most important issue that's ever arisen in human history. Will the human species survive for another several decades? That's not a joke. We are facing an environmental crisis which will either be resolved now, or else in several decades it'll be too late to resolve. It's not that everyone will die. It's that the world will be headed on an irreversible course towards destruction of the human species and a good deal of life on earth. We're seeing early signs of it now. Early signs in droughts, floods, superheated environment. But that's a bare foretaste of what's coming, if we don't do something about it. Now we have a several decades in which we can do something about it. It's not going to be done by the leadership. They're listening to other voices. It can be done if there is enough popular pressure on political leaders, to compel them to act. And that's a very concrete issue in every country. Talk about the United States; overwhelming power, so the most important country. Under very extensive popular pressure President Biden has put

forth a program on paper which is not perfect but it's the best program of, certainly the best one ever in the United States, but probably the best one of any country in the world. That's the program. Then come the actions. So let's take a look at the actions. Monday last week the IPCC, the international group of scientists, 200 countries that assesses the climate situation, Monday last week they came out with their latest report. The report was dire. A dire warning that we must very quickly eliminate fossil fuels or we will pass irreversible tipping points. Can't do anything about it anymore. That was Monday. What happened Tuesday. Tuesday President Biden issued an appeal to OPEC, the oil cartel to increase production! Increase production! Because he wants gas prices in the United States to be lower, which will help his electoral prospects. So there's rhetoric and there's action. Same in Europe, same elsewhere. What can bridge this gap is the same popular pressure that compelled Biden to develop the rhetorical program that's on paper. So if you ask who I'm interested in, it's the public, the people who can act to compel these

things to happen. You don't contact the political leaders. They know what they're doing. What you do is approach, try to organize, educate, among the general public, so that they will then carry out the actions that will impose the pressures that will compel political leaders and in fact corporate leaders to behave differently. So corporations now, major corporations, are entering what they call a new phase in which they're not going to be just working for profit, but they're going to be working for the common good. That's the rhetoric, and the rhetoric came about because they're under very serious public pressure. Then comes the question of turning them from rhetoric to action and that requires more intensive, more effective public pressure. So I think that's the way major things happen. That's the way major changes take place. That's the way slavery was abolished. It's the way women's rights were obtained to some extent. It's why workers' rights to a limited extent were obtained. Any progress in history has worked this way. Not through political parties. They will act if they're under pressure.

Host: As you mentioned the corporations, I've received the question about one of your ideas about corporations. About your notes on job insecurity and how the corporations use it, how it functions to subordinate the workers. This person asks doesn't job insecurity produce more productive people as security usually produces lazy workers who are confident about their income? When the corporation says if you don't do it for 10 bucks, I've got someone who does it for 7 bucks in India, isn't that a natural comparison between a mankind in the U.S. and a mankind in India? And looking from a global point of view, isn't it fair for the Indian worker to have that opportunity? Isn't that a more egalitarian world?

Chomsky: Indian workers should have the same opportunities that other human beings have, to be engaged directly in the decisions that affect their lives. So suppose I get a job in an auto plant, ford motor plant. In our current system I am saying I agree to be a slave for most of my waking life. I don't agree with that. I don't think people should agree to be slaves for most of their waking lives. If I take a job in an auto plant I'm a servant to

a master. What the master says I have to do. Master says you have to wear these clothes, I have to wear these clothes. Master says you can take five minutes to go to the bathroom at three o'clock in the afternoon, I do that. My master says here's the number of turns on a screw that you have to make, you have to make 78 turns every minute, I have to do that. I'm a slave. That's slavery for most of one's waking life. Well do we have to accept that as a way of life? I don't think so. Nor did American workers or other workers in the early stages of the industrial revolution. When they had a free independent labor press, they vigorously opposed the subjugation to masters, they called it wage slavery. This was such a popular position that it was even the position of Abraham Lincoln's republican party in the mid-19th century. Same in England. Same in other industrial countries as the industrialized. It took an enormous amount of propaganda, indoctrination, control, to get people to accept what is totally intolerable. And there are alternatives. Many alternatives. Working people can control the workplace. Why not? They should be in control of the conditions

of their lives. Not impossible. In fact, it's done in many places. One of the major, most successful, conglomerate in the world, is in the Basque country in Spain, Mondragon founded in the 1950s under church auspices. It's a huge conglomerate owned by the workers, directors picked and selected, appointed by the workers, can be replaced by them. It's manufacturing, banks, housing, hospitals. Very successful. One of the few enterprises that survived the financial crisis in 2008. There are many other smaller examples. These are not impossible. There's no reason, I don't think, why life should be organized so that for most of a person's waking life they are subordinate to masters. No economic reason, no political reason, certainly no reason in terms of human rights and human dignity. So I think those are things we can aspire to. They're not out of the question.

Host: I received another note, it's an old quote in the documentary about the effect of media on the populations, you've once said "I'm rather against the whole notion of developing public personalities who are treat-

ed as stars of one kind or another, where aspects of their personal life is supposed to have some significance."

Chomsky: A person's personal life is their own. It's nobody else's business. Yes; we should have freedom and control over our personal lives. Of course, there's a limit. You have a limit on your personal life when you begin to interfere with the personal lives of others. So let's take a very immediate, concrete instance. I'll again talk about the United States but it's quite general. A large part of the population now says I don't want to be vaccinated. That person is saying: I want to be a killer; I want to be able to go out freely and kill other people. Because that's what it means not to be vaccinated. If someone says I don't want to take a polio vaccine they're not permitted to go in public, they're not permitted to enter schools, correctly. Because they are essentially killers. And that's what we're seeing now. It's as if somebody said: I don't want to obey traffic rules, I want to drive on the wrong side of the road, I want to go through red lights. Well at that point your freedom ends. The community has a right to protect itself against people who seek to de-

stroy other people's lives, survival, health, and so on. So yes, there's a limit to personal freedom. Any community will have to accept that. And it happens to be a very live issue today. It's an issue which in fact is causing great danger to the entire human species. It's happening in the global south, so-called third world, south Asia, Africa, Latin America, many. There are very few vaccines available. India is a little better but most of Asia and most of Latin America, terrible situation in Africa. The rich countries are monopolizing the vaccines for themselves. That means, first of all, that an enormous number of people in the world are going to suffer severely. And it also means that the virus will mutate as happened in India when the delta variant appeared, which will be of great danger not only to the people where it appears, but to the entire world. Almost all the infections today in the United States are the delta variant. That's what happens when you permit a virus to mutate. The virus will go on its merry course, mutating, creating new variants. Some of them may be lethal, some highly contagious, some may be both lethal and highly contagious, some

may be beyond the control of possible vaccines. Nevertheless, the rich countries, and here Europe is actually worse than the United States, are hoarding the vaccines for themselves and even protecting the rights of the major corporations to keep the vaccines and the mode of production secret. Even protecting that right that is built into the so-called free trade agreements. They're highly protectionist, they're radically opposed to free trade, they're imposed by private and state power, and they have extremely harmful consequences, in this case lethal consequences. So all of these things have to do with personal life, community responsibility, what it would be like to live in a society in which people care about each other and their fate. It's all intertwined.

Host: I've mentioned that to part of our audience before and I'd like to mention it now again that I'm particularly thankful to professor Chomsky for giving us the chance to have direct communication with him and it's not the first instance that professor Chomsky has had direct communication with his audience inside Iran. Now I'm receiving some questions about linguis-

tics. Mr. Nazarnejad says: “Professor Chomsky, as you know Greek and Latin languages play a crucial role in structuring western civilization and their legal systems. Is it possible for Iranians to develop their socio-cultural structures by learning their principle ancient languages as western civilizations did?”

Chomsky: Iranian civilization is far deeper than western civilization. It goes back thousands of years as a rich cultural tradition. Most of that time, until very recently, the west was a group of barbarians wandering around northwest Europe. The centers of civilization were China, India, Iran, Central Asia. Those were the main centers of civilization until quite recently. In fact it was just imperial conquest, starting mainly in the 17th and 18th century, that made so-called western civilization preeminent. It's not permanent in history and it's even changing right now. We could go through the details of what happened. But as far as Iran is concerned, a country with a rich history, a rich cultural tradition, and becoming immersed in it, carrying it forward, it is a major contribution not only to Iran but to world cul-

ture in general. Yes; it's necessary for people in Iran, in India, in Africa, in Brazil, to enter, in some fashion that they should choose, into the dominant power system of the last several centuries, what's called western civilization. And there's a lot to learn there. There are major achievements. Major scientific achievements, technological achievements, cultural advancements, great deal to learn. And achievements even in creating partial democracies more than elsewhere. Much to learn. But plenty of internal sources to draw from in entering into this world. So it's not an "either or situation" but rather a "both and" situation. Enter into world of the reigning power systems, learn and acquire what one can from them, draw from our own internal resources, to amplify, enrich, world culture and world civilization.

Host: I have another note about the issue of languages. It says there is a view on language which seems to be inseparable from Abrahamic religions. The bible begins with "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." What's similar in the Islamic tradition is that God has taught man how to

read and write. I'd like to know, in your view, is it a surprise that Abrahamic religions give such a central character to language while the evolutionist view finds it mostly a developed tool for communication?

Chomsky: Well, the ancient texts have to be interpreted today in a metaphoric fashion. We can't interpret them literally. I think that's understood by religious leaders the more. Certainly in the western tradition which is what I know best that's accepted by major figures like Thomas Aquinas and others. On the Indian tradition far back as 2500 years ago it was already pretty well accepted. When we do interpret it metaphorically, there are some similarities. So for example we have pretty good reason to believe that language is unique to human beings. Its major properties are common to the species, but they have no analogues anywhere in any other species. Should say there are communication systems in just about every species down to bacteria. Organisms can, trees can communicate through their root systems. Communication is everywhere in nature, but language is not. It happens to be used for communication but

it's not fundamentally a system of communication. Language is a system of creation and use of thought. That's unique to humans. When did that develop? Well we now have a fair amount of information about it. We know that humans around the world share this capacity. There's no known differences among humans. And we also know from genomic studies that humans began to separate roughly 150 000 years ago. That's an instant in evolutionary time. So it's not surprising that we're all pretty much identical. If you ask when humans appeared? Not long before that. The archaeological evidence indicates that modern humans, people like us, emerged roughly two to three hundred thousand years ago. Notice that these are flicks... an eye blink in evolutionary time, almost instantaneous. And there's no indication in the archaeological record of any meaningful symbolic activity before human beings appeared, comes not long after that. So putting this all together it seems that humans appeared... some rewiring of the brain appeared, maybe a small rewiring led to modern humans. Modern human language came almost immediately as a

consequence of this, shared by the species. So in a sense, from an evolutionary point of view, it developed almost instantaneously. Of course, from an evolutionary view, instantaneously can mean a hundred thousand years. That's evolutionary time. So going back to ancient texts, there is a metaphorical interpretation of them which has some relation to what modern science has so far illuminated.

Host: Another question on the function of media: Regarding your notes on how the media controls the masses, I think we have a surprising situation in the Iranian society. We are not under the hegemony of the international media; at the same time our own media is not as powerful as to be able to recruit every person in the society. As an outcome people have diverse thoughts and flexible minds. Now can we credit the government for that or is it just an unwanted byproduct?

Chomsky: Thomas Jefferson once said that it's more important to have independent media than a democratic government. Without independent media the population is basically controlled by power systems. It doesn't

matter if they have formal democracy, they won't be able to exercise informed judgments. So free and independent media are a critical element of any healthy society. If we take the United States again, along with Britain the earliest modern formal democracies, the founders of the United States insisted in the U.S. constitution a crucial provision calling for free and independent media. Those are not the words. What's in the constitution is establishment of the post office. What was the post office in the 18th century? The post office was a subsidy to free an independent media. Virtually all of post office traffic was journals. And they gave very low cost. So they were essentially subsidizing free and independent media that was a critical element of the establishment of U.S. democracy. Now power systems don't like that and they're working very hard to undermine it. So right now, in the United States you can read the republican party, which is super reactionary party, is trying essentially to destroy the post office. Why? Because it serves public interests. It in fact even serves the interests of free and independent media which they don't want. It reaches peo-

ple all over the country, could have a much broader function, could be the place where people do their banking, most of their activities. But it's under control. It's a government institution so therefore it's under public control to the extent that the government responds to the public. Put it under private control as the right wing wants, it's under the control of tyrannies which have no accountability to the public. As far as the press is concerned it eliminates the support for a free and independent press. Now when we look at the media there's been a battle all through history as to whether they should serve the public or serve private interests. The United States is in some ways the most free country in the world. But it's also the most business-run country among the advanced societies. So business is much more powerful in the United States than it is in England, Europe, others. It's powerful there too, but not to the same extent. And we see one consequence of that in the media. The United States is the only major country that does not have public media, like the *BBC* in England, *Deutsche Welle* in Germany. Most countries have public media.

Well public media are free to the extent that the country is free. If it's a totalitarian state, state media are agencies of state power. If it's a country like, say, England, moderately free, then the *BBC* to some extent is free and independent. Corporate media are quite different. Corporate media are owned by private power. They are funded and supported by private power, advertisers. And what they are in effect is major corporations selling audiences to other businesses. Well, the owners and the purchasers of course have a significant effect on media content. It interacts with the general intellectual culture which is subject to similar influences. And major corporations are of course closely linked to state power. In fact, they substantially control it. So we have a network of systems of control which constrain and shape what the media present. And that's extremely important for the general public to come to understand... The first thing I do every morning is read the *New York Times*. It's the major newspaper in the world, it's the best source of general information, but you have to read it understanding that it's selecting what to report, and shaping how it reports it

in the interests of private and state power and the dominant intellectual culture. Those are factors tightly interlinked which shape and control what you read and you see it every time you open the newspapers. So take yesterday, last newspaper I looked at, major story ridiculing a leader of the Taliban to show how ludicrous and ridiculous they are. This was not just the New York Times. Every major newspaper in the west, the London, Guardian, the French press, everywhere, ridiculing this crazy guy who said the following. Look at what he said. He said when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan 20 years ago, it did not know that Osama Bin Laden was responsible for 9/11. How ridiculous! How ludicrous! How awful these people are! Except that it happens to be true. It happens to be absolutely true, and easily documented. Eight months after 9/11 the head of the FBI, the main investigative institution, Robert Mueller after the most intensive investigation that had ever been taken place in the world, after eight months he informed the press we suspect that Osama Bin Laden was responsible for 9/11, but we are not able to establish it. So what the

Taliban leader said happened to be exactly correct. But in order to recognize that, you have to be willing to go back 20 years, look at the facts, explore them, and you have to violate doctrine. Doctrine says that the United States invaded Afghanistan because it knew that Al-Qaeda was responsible for 9/11. That's religious doctrine. It's a fatwa from the government and the main institutions. You have to believe that. Even though it happens to be false and easily demonstrated to be false, and the Taliban leader happened to be telling the truth. Well that's a typical example of the way the news gets shaped, formulated, in the interest of private power. Now I don't say that the editors and the reporters were lying. When they said the Taliban leader was lying they believed it. That's what they've been taught. That's what they've been indoctrinated in. People who live under religious control should be very familiar with this, you hear the fatwa, you repeat it, everyone says it, it's got to be true. Then it just becomes part of your background belief system. Well to a certain extent that's even true in the freest and most independent democratic societies. I mentioned one exam-

ple but could go on and on. So you can... it's a very good thing to have partially independent media, we learn a lot from them, but we have to approach them with an open critical mind, willingness to explore the facts for ourselves. They're there. They're not hidden. It's not quantum theory, very hard to understand. It's easy to understand. Just takes an open mind and some work. We might think of what Emanuel Kant said about the enlightenment. It was asked to the question what is the enlightenment? And his answer was the enlightenment is courage. Courage to use your mind freely and question accepted doctrine and dogma. That's the enlightenment. Well to a certain extent it succeeded, to a limited extent we have to carry it further, each in our own way, each society in its own way. Have the courage to use your minds freely and independently.

Host: as you were talking about politics, Mr. Firoz asks "Professor Chomsky, the history of conflict between Palestine and Israel has been going on for nearly eight decades and day after day it has been getting worse for the people of Palestine. Do you see any feasible

peaceful solution for this conflict? What do you think about the so-called resistance approach as it is promoted by the Iranian government?

Chomsky: Well, I won't go through the whole history but let's start in 1967 when Israel conquered the west bank, the Gaza strip, and the Golan Heights. That's when a new period develops. Since that time Israel has been following a very systematic policy, has deeper roots, the policy is to construct a greater Israel which will include a vastly expanded Jerusalem. What's called Jerusalem now is about five times its size ever in history, incorporates Palestinian towns and villages in the surrounding, take over this greater Jerusalem, establish it as the capital of Israel, ensure that there's a substantial Jewish majority by kicking out Palestinians from their homes as is happening right now, it's what led to the may uprising, and so on. Meanwhile take over everything that's of value in the West Bank. Gaza has been turned into just a prison which you crush. So put that aside. Golan Heights has been annexed illegally. In fact everything that Israel is doing is in violation of interna-

tional law, of the judgment of the world court, of the Geneva conventions, and furthermore they know it, their leading legal advisors back in 1967 already pointed out to them that all these plans are illegal. They can continue to pursue them because the United States supports them. I'll come back to that. The plan is take over... Gaza is a prison, the Syrian Golan Heights we just annex, the west bank we vastly expand Jerusalem, we take over... Israel takes over everything that's of value in the west bank. So the Jordan valley, it's about a third of the viable land, towns in the center of the west bank like Ma'ale Adumim, infrastructure, highways which reach to it bisect the west bank to the north, Ariel Adumim. Take over everything that's of value but not the population centers. So they are not incorporated. Israel doesn't want Palestinians in greater Israel. So it doesn't take over Nablus. It doesn't take over Tulkarm. Of course there are plenty of Palestinians left in the areas that Israel does take over. And they are placed in about 165 small enclaves surrounded by Israeli troops and checkpoints, so they can't get out to their olive groves, their agricultural

lands, unless an Israeli soldier decides to let them out. They can't get to the water supplies. Constant atrocities taking place by settlers, by the army, but at a low level so they don't reach international attention. That's the plan. It's being implemented. It's been implemented for 50 years. It can continue because the United States supports it and because Europe is too cowardly to challenge the United States. So Europe doesn't like it and Europe rebuilds what Israel destroys, and then it destroys again, but it won't do anything about it. Because it's afraid of the United States. The United States is basically the Godfather, the mafia Don. You don't want to offend him. As long as that continues, there's not going to be much hope for the Palestinians. But it can change. It can change by the means that we described at the outset of this discussion. By public pressure and activism which will change American policy. And that's not a dream. American public has changed enormously in the last few years. The main impact has been the Israeli attacks on Gaza which are so savage and brutal that they cannot be concealed and they have had a major effect on public

opinion. I've been involved in this actively for 50 years. For a long time I literally had to have police protection if I wanted to talk about this at a university. That's changed. And it changed in the last 10 or 15 years. The Gaza attacks were a large part of it. By now people who call themselves liberals are more supportive of Palestinian rights than of Israel. That's particularly true among younger people. The major support for Israel has shifted far to the right. It's among evangelical Christians who have some story about Armageddon and Christ returning and so on, and ultra-nationalists, and the military and security sectors. That's where support for Israel is. In fact support for Israel is among right-wing republicans. This has not yet affected policy. But it can, with more organization, more activism, serious solidarity groups, could have the same kind of effect that it's had in other cases. In China, Central America, South Africa, others. Took time, took pressure, took work, but it finally led to changes in attitudes. You have to bear in mind the way things that have happened in the past. Take South Africa; until 1988 the United States was strongly sup-

porting the apartheid regime. In 1988 the United States called Mandela's National African Congress one of the world's more notorious terrorist groups. Nelson Mandela himself was barred from entry into the United States without special dispensation. Until 2008 when a congressional resolution said yes, he's not one of the more notorious terrorists in the world. Well, by 1990 apartheid had collapsed. That was after many years of work. Just two years after the African National Congress was designated one of the world's leading terrorist organizations. Took plenty of work on the ground, not just in the United States, in other countries. But it can happen, and it's happening case after case. That's the hope for the Palestinians not just in the United States, in Europe, and other countries and so on. It's a possibility. It's not immediate. It'll be plenty of work and effort, but it's not impossible.

Host: Thank you so much. we have reached the one-hour limit that we've had in mind for this session. I'm receiving lots of questions, I'm receiving lots of thank notes, but I simply can't go through all of them. So, I just

want to thank you on behalf of the students, graduate students, and faculty members of different universities.

Maftouni: I should say you waste no words. I've exchanged emails with many top scholars, each of them one of a kind in their own field. A unique feature appears in your emails. Actually you waste no words. Even just one word. You use the least needed words and it suggests, as the father of modern linguistics, you've gotten the harness of words at your hands.

Chomsky: Thank you very much.

Host: I just want to mention a trivial point about Professor Maftouni. I'm not sure if it's appropriate, and if she likes me to bring that up. But her husband is a person who was tortured before the revolution, in 1972, for writing a political satire criticizing the Shah regime and defending human rights. At that time Nixon was the president of the United States and the security in Iran was really tight. So as a result, he was caught and he was tortured, and he lost his ability of using his hands and legs. He was painting before that and then he became a mouth-painter. And Nadia met and married her

after the revolution knowing the fact that he is a man in wheelchair. So I just wanted to mention that to say your thoughts and your words, when you talk about US foreign policy, it has a direct effect on people in Iran who are thankful for your notes.

Chomsky: Thank you very much, thank you. It's a great pleasure to be with you.

Host: Also, a pleasure for us.

Mafouni: Thank you and bye.

Chomsky: Bye.



Nadia MAFTOUNI



Mahmoud Nuri

