Borough of Manhattan Community College
Drug Policy as Social Control
by Noam Chomsky

In the typical Third World society, like Colombia, or India, or Mexico, or Egypt—they are all more or less the same—there is a sector of great wealth, enormous wealth, there are large numbers of people who live somewhere between suffering and misery, and then there is a sector who are just superfluous; they're of no use, that is, they don't contribute to profit. So you just have to get rid of them somehow.

Every Third World society has the same structure, and that structure is now being, imposed on the United States. Inequality is growing, a large part of the population, probably a majority, is declining in earnings, wealth is enormous and very concentrated, profits are going through the ceiling. They have never had such profits before and a large part of the population is useless. Unskilled labor in urban slums, which happen to be mostly black and Hispanic, the superfluous people.

In these circumstances what do you do? Well, you have to do the same thing they do in the Third World. You have to get rid of the superfluous people, and you have to control the ones who are suffering. How do you control them? One of the best ways of controlling them is by increasing fear, and hatred, and making them hate each other and fear the superfluous people. That's the way it's done everywhere, and it's happening in the United States, That's where the drug war fits in.

In the United States the drug war is basically a technique for controlling dangerous populations internal to the country and doesn't have much to do with drugs. That's always been true. It goes back to England in the nineteenth century when they made gin illegal and kept whiskey legal. There was a simple class reason for it. Gin was the drink of the working class and whiskey was the think of the upper class. This is a way of controlling the working class people.

When alcohol prohibition was instituted in the United States, the purpose was to close the saloons in New York City where immigrants and working class people came, but nobody stopped anyone from drinking in the rich suburbs. In the case of marijuana, the marijuana legislation introduced right after prohibition ended started in the border states but it was aimed at Mexicans. Nobody even knew what marijuana was, it was just something the Mexican immigrants used and therefore it had to he criminalized so you could control the Mexican immigrant population.

The so-called drug war was started in the 1980s and it was aimed directly at the black population. None of this has anything to do with drugs. It has to do with controlling and criminalizing dangerous populations. It's kind of like a U.S. counterpart to "social cleansing."

Poor black males are criminalized the most by the drug war. The number of black men in the criminal justice system is enormous. That criminalizes a dangerous population. What about the population which is declining in earnings and jobs? They're frightened. The more you can increase the fear of drugs and crime and welfare mothers and immigrants and aliens and poverty and all sorts of things, the more you control people. Make them hate each other. Be frightened of each other and think that the other is stealing from them. If you do that you can control people. And that's just what the drug war does.
If we wanted to stop drug use in the United States there’s an easy way to do it: educational programs. They work very efficiently, and they have made a big difference to the extent they have been used. Among the more privileged sectors, my children, probably yours, the use of drugs has been declining for a long time and so has the use of every other substance. My students don’t smoke, don’t use drugs, consumption of coffee is going down. In the United States, cigarettes are a class issue now. Students at universities almost never smoke cigarettes. But if you go to a poor section of town, you'll see a lot of teenage kids smoking cigarettes. It’s a class issue, just like the use of drugs, just like the use of alcohol. This comes through changes in perception and understanding.

But today educational programs are on the decline; they're being cut back. The circumstances driving people to use drugs are intensifying. There's more poverty and fewer jobs, lower wages and fewer support systems. That's what's driving people to drugs and that's where the problem lies. But it's not being approached because the drug problem has been converted into a means of social control.

It’s like when you turn on the television today, you hear all sorts of attacks on welfare mothers, even from some liberals. The idea is to get working people on the opposite side of the welfare mothers. The wages of working people are going down, their lives are getting worse, and their children are not going to have even the opportunities they had. So what do you do? Do you tell them, "We're trying to harm you"? Or do you tell them, "Welfare mothers are stealing from you"? Of course, you tell them welfare mothers are stealing from you.

Thus, if some teenage girl was raped and has a child, she's stealing from you, so you hate her. That's why they've made the welfare system so harsh and cruel, increasing cruelty and fear. These are all methods of social control. They're used everywhere.

In a country like the United States, where you can’t really send out the paramilitary forces to murder people, as they do more and more in the Third World, you rely more heavily on techniques of social control. That’s basically what the drug war is all about.