

# OBA Live - Elma Drayer over Paula Bermann - Deze ontspoorde wereld

- Programma begint na 4 minuten en 54 seconden. Even schuiven dus ...

Hoofdgast was Elma Drayer, columniste en vaste medewerker van OBA Live. Zij bewerkte het oorlogsdagboek van Paula Bermann 'Deze ontspoorde wereld', met daarin een indringende beschrijving van wat de Tweede Wereldoorlogen en het onderduiken betekende voor het dagelijkse leven van een Amsterdams Joods gezin. Paula en haar man overleefden de oorlog niet, ze werden verraden, opgepakt en via Westerbork naar Bergen-Belsen gedeporteerd. Hun drie kinderen overleefden de oorlog uiteindelijk wel en konden het oorlogsdagboek in veiligheid stellen.

Nelleke Noordervliet had het over hoge en lage cultuur, over elite en volk en over hoe die termen af en toe flink misbruikt worden. Is het redelijk om volkscultuur zoals carnaval en bloemencorso af te zetten tegen concerten van het Concertgebouworkest, zoals VVD-politicus Thierry Aartsen onlangs deed? Of is dit een politiek spel?

Gawie Keyser portretteerde filmmaker en beeldend kunstenaar David Lynch, bekend van films als The Elephant Man, Mulholland Drive en de televisieserie Twin Peaks. Er is nu een nieuwe biografie over hem, er komt een tentoonstelling in het Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht met 500 van zijn schilderijen en een aantal van zijn films is digitaal gerestaureerd en draait weer in de bioscoop.

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# Jordan Heller ~ One Of America's Poorest Cities Has A Radical Plan To Remake Itself



CLEVELAND — The last time Tymika Thomas' name appeared in newsprint was in connection with an elaborate 2012 robbery in the Cleveland suburb of

Wickliffe in which Thomas and two accomplices stole numerous handguns and more than \$30,000 in cash from a bookie.

Thomas, who knew the victim and was well aware that he kept a large amount of money in his home, took the man out for a night on the town while her partners broke into his house. Thomas and the man returned to find two armed robbers wearing ski masks. They absconded with the man's possessions and took Thomas as a hostage. The kidnapping was bogus, of course, meant to disabuse the victim of any suspicion that Thomas was involved.

"The judge called me the mastermind," says Thomas, now 42, dressed in a blue smock and a hair net that covers her thick blonde braids, before explaining her motive for the crime that earned her four years and nine months in prison — a sentence she completed last year. "We were all kind of in a rut, I had six kids and just lost my job, and we were just looking to get financially stable."

We are in the Evergreen Cooperative Laundry, located in Cleveland's Collinwood neighborhood on the east side of the city, a community that has long suffered from disinvestment. Despite her felony conviction ("Getting a job was my biggest fear," she says, "having to check that felony box"), Thomas is now a supervisor at the laundry, where she runs a crew that prepares packs of surgical linen for the Cleveland Clinic, the world-renowned hospital nearby.

Read more: <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/cleveland-ohio-poorest-cities>

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# A Complex World: My Interview With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky has revolutionized multiple fields of study from psychology to linguistics to political science. Chomsky changed the way human beings even think about language through such concepts as the universal grammar theory. In the field of psychology, Chomsky was instrumental in debunking Skinner's theory of behaviorism. In the field of political science, with books such as *Manufacturing Consent* to *Fateful Triangle* to *Hegemony or Survival*, and many others, Chomsky enlightened people all over the world, from individual citizens to revolutionary political leaders. It is for these reasons, and more, why it is no surprise that Chomsky is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of our time.

Shortly after the 2016 U.S. elections, I had the privilege of being able to sit down with Professor Chomsky at his office for a chat on an array of different topics, such as what is the fate of an honest intellectual, the concept of pre-modern societies, ethnic conflict, the religious nation-state, federalism, the political vulgarization of genocide, what is power, the value of truth and reconciliation commissions, and anarchism.

*What is the Fate of An Honest Intellectual?*

*Noam Chomsky* There's a history, goes back 2500 years, back to the origins of recorded history, classical Greece, and the biblical records. Go back to Greece; there was a man [Socrates] who was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens by asking searching questions. His fate was to be killed with poison—given the hemlock. In the biblical record, which is partly accurate, partly not, there were critical intellectuals—the word that is used for them is prophets. That is a dubious translation of an obscure Hebrew phrase. What they were, if you look at what

they were actually saying, were critics. They criticized the acts of the evil kings, they gave geopolitical analysis, warned that the policies were going to lead to disaster; they called for helping widows and orphans and so on. That is what today we call dissident intellectuals. What happened to them? They were imprisoned, driven into the desert, maligned; the worst of the Kings, King Ahab, condemned the Prophet Elijah as a hater of Israel because he was condemning the acts of the evil Kings—it is probably the origin of the notion of anti-American and anti-Israel, and so on. And it goes the same way throughout history.

Going up to modern times, the term intellectual, in the current sense, is really not used before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It came into use at the time of the Dreyfus trial in France, and Emile Zola and others who supported Dreyfus and condemned the state and the military. They were critical intellectuals [who] were bitterly condemned by the mainstream of the intellectual classes. Zola himself had to flee France for his life. That is the treatment of dissidents.

Shortly after that came the First World War, which was very striking, a lot of commentary on it now since it is the centenary. One of the most interesting things is the reaction of intellectuals. On every side, the intellectual classes lined up passionately in support of their own state. In Germany, there was a manifesto of 93 leading intellectuals instructing the civilized world that Germany is defending the great cultural legacy of Beethoven, Immanuel Kant, and so on, and the world should join them—on the Western side, the same. There were critics, [such as] Bertrand Russell in England, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht in Germany, Eugene Debs in the United States; they were put in jail. That is intellectuals.

*What is the price that you have personally paid as an intellectual for criticizing the actions of your own community?*

The United States is a pretty free society these days—and people with a degree of privilege are not subject to—it is not like Turkey today where you are thrown in jail if you say something the President doesn't like—so it is vilification, marginalization, denunciation. Actually, there were penalties, but they were self-induced. I was involved extensively in civil disobedience, resistance, came pretty close to a long jail sentence, but I can't call that repression—it was things I was doing consciously.

*I know people like Norman Finkelstein, he faced certain consequences; he was*

*not able to get tenure at his university.*

It is a special case. It is a very rotten one, but it is a special case. Norman Finkelstein exposed the dishonest criminality of a Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, who went berserk, and tried in any way he could think of to destroy Finkelstein to the point of—I can go through the details—but it was Dershowitz's jihad to try to protect himself. He knew that he could not answer Finkelstein's criticisms. So the way he picked was to try vilification, denunciation, massive efforts to prevent him from getting tenure, and yes, so that happened. It is a rotten case, but it is a special case.

### *Pre-Modern Society*

Pre-modern society—pre-modern means not having assimilated and accepted the basic values of the enlightenment and since—and that's a large part of the Western world. Take the United States, leader of the free world, most powerful state in human history, supposedly a beacon of freedom and enlightenment. Take, say, global warming, one of the major problems humans have ever faced, it is hard to convince people in the United States it is a real problem. The reason—40 percent of the population thinks it can't be a problem because Jesus is coming in a few decades. Is that pre-modern? Yeah, it is pre-modern. It is a culturally conservative society—pre-modern in many respects.

Take Europe—Austria and Germany—two countries which evoke some memories from the 1930s. In Austria, a neo-Nazi party is likely to take the Presidency. In Germany, ultra-right nationalist party with neofascist tendencies is defeating the mainstream Merkel party in local elections. Is that pre-modern? Was Nazism pre-modern? Depends what you mean by modern. If you mean by that not having assimilated the fundamental values that were brought forth during the enlightenment and since, yes, much of the world is pre-modern.

In fact, take a phenomenon that is taking place right at this moment. There is a conference in Morocco, as you know, the COP22 conference. It is an international effort to put some teeth in the global warming agreements. What is happening at COP22 is that the values and hopes of civilization are being upheld by China—a harsh authoritarian state is in the lead in trying to mobilize support to deal with this massive problem. The United States, the leader of the free world, is at the end of the line trying to draw the train backwards. It is an astonishing

phenomenon, and it is not commented on.

### *Ethnic Conflict*

*Until not so long ago, liberal, socialists, and Marxist theoreticians assumed that conflicts involving ethnicity were a phenomenon of pre-modern society and that such conflicts would progressively fade away. Why haven't we as a society been able to overcome the futility of engaging in ethnic conflict—the uselessness. Why haven't we been able to overcome that?*

To some extent, we have. Not totally. There has been progress. Take Europe; for centuries, Europe was the most savage place in the world. The Europeans were just slaughtering one another. The Thirty Years War of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, maybe a third of the population in Germany was wiped out. There was another 30 years war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—from 1914 to 1945—a total horror story. I don't have to tell you what happened in Europe, the rest of the world. Since 1945, there have not been any major wars in Europe. Is that because we are more civilized? No. It is because it was understood that the next time you have a war, you are finished. Humans have created the capacity to destroy themselves and everything else, and we have come very close to blowing everything up. There have been many cases where terminal nuclear war was extremely close and the threat is in fact increasing now.

### *Religious-Nation State*

*Why is it dangerous to recognize a country as a Muslim state or a Buddhist state or a Jewish state or a Christian state? Why is that—why is that dangerous?*

It depends what your values are. If you believe in democracy, states are states of their citizens—not of some privilege sector of the citizens. So if the United States were called a “white state” that would be outrageous, similarly, if it were called a Christian state and similarly if Pakistan is called an Islamic state or if Israel is called a Jewish state. That is saying that our society recognizes two categories of citizens, “the privileged categories” and the “others”, and that violates the most elementary principles of democratic freedom. I should say if these designations are just symbolic, maybe it does not matter. So, for example, with the United States if the official day of rest is Sunday instead of Thursday, okay, it is not a big deal. It is symbolic.

## *Federalism*

*With rebel conflicts and separatist conflicts being waged in various parts of the globe, what role do you believe federalism can play in de-stabilizing these conflicts?*

Well, take, say, Europe again. One of the greatest achievements of post-war Europe—now under threat incidentally—is a slow move towards a kind of federalism. The Schengen agreement, which permits free passage among the countries of Europe, is a step towards a more tolerant and civilized society; it is a kind of federalism. It has positive and negative aspects because of the way it is implemented. Because of the way it was integrated into the Eurozone—which is something separate from the EU—it has led to a situation where sovereignty has passed from populations to the bureaucracy in Brussels with the German banks hanging over their shoulders. That is where basic decisions are made. It does not matter who people elect for their own government, the major decisions are out of their hands. That has led to extreme resentment—justified resentment—taking self-destructive paths, but the resentment is understandable. That is part of the background for the rise of the ultra-right parties which appeal to the population on the grounds that they no longer control their own destiny. If [Marine] Le Pen wins in France, as she might, she might very well implement what they call “Frexit”—a referendum to pull France out of the European Union, which might destroy it. Now we are back to Europe of competing nationalities, which [has] a pretty ugly past.

## *Political Vulgarization of Genocide*

*How has the concept of genocide become, as you state, politically vulgarized and why is it dangerous to politicize the concept of genocide?*

Well, genocide had a meaning in the early stages. I mean, it is not a matter of the definition but the way it was understood. Genocide meant what the Nazis did to the Jews, for example. That was genocide. By now the term is used so broadly that people even talk about committing genocide against five people, or a massacre somewhere with a couple hundred people is called genocide. And in fact, it is used in a very restrictive way. We use the term genocide to refer to the atrocities committed by someone else, not our own. Let us take a real case—the Clinton and Blair sanctions on Iraq—that actually was called genocide by the distinguished

international diplomats who administered the oil for food program, the so-called “humanitarian” aspect of the sanctions. Denis Halliday, who resigned in protest, because he said they are genocidal, and Hans von Sponeck, who followed him, resigned on the grounds that the [sanctions] amounted to genocide. Hans von Sponeck, in fact, published a detailed book about it called *A Different Kind of War*. They did condemn the sanctions as genocidal. What was the result? Try to find a copy of von Sponeck’s book. Try to find a reference to it. Try to find a review. Try to find anything. This is wiped out of western commentary. The last time I looked, there was not a single review in the United States. The only review in England I think was in the communist party newspaper.

*So what needs to be done to reverse the political vulgarization of the concept of the genocide, can it still be used?*

It can be used if we are willing to become civilized to recognize that crimes are crimes whether they commit them or we commit them. We could, for example, listen to Justice Robert Jackson—the Chief Prosecutor of Nuremberg—his injunction to the tribunal. He spoke to the tribunal and said: we have to recognize that crimes are crimes whether they commit them or we commit them. We are handing these defendants, he said, a poisoned chalice, and if we sip from it, we must be subject to the same conditions. If not, the whole trial is a farce. Is that applied on and when Britain and the United States invaded Iraq? It is a textbook example of aggression with absolutely no justification, textbook example of what the Nuremberg tribunal called the “supreme international crime” which differs from other war crimes in that it includes all of the evil that follows. For example, the rise of ISIS, and the death of millions of people, includes all of that. Can you find any commentary in the United States even calling [the US-UK invasion] a crime?

Obama is greatly admired on the left because he said it was a blunder. It is just like German generals after Stalingrad who said that the two front war was a blunder—which it was—we should have knocked out England first. That is as far as you can go. The head of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, when this was specifically brought to his attention can only go as far as saying that [Iraq] was a mistake. Was it a mistake when the Nazis committed aggression? Was it a mistake when Russians invaded Afghanistan? If you are a loyal communist, it was a mistake. We do not call it that. We cannot rise to the level of civilization—even the head of Human Rights Watch, in the leading left liberal journal of intellectuals in



the West, the New York Review, [and] Obama, any of them can't say that we committed a crime. At most, we made mistakes.

Go back to Justice Jackson. Anybody listen to his words? Then take Vietnam. The worst crime of the post-war era, worst crime, millions of people killed, three countries destroyed, people still dying from the chemical warfare that was initiated by John F. Kennedy and expanded. Is it a mistake? Is it a crime? Is anybody guilty, responsible?

Right now, the Obama administration is sponsoring a big memorial of the Vietnam War, and Obama made a, you know, passionate speech with his elevated rhetoric about what happened. He even did talk about crimes; he talked about the crimes that were committed against the American veterans who were not treated properly. What about the Vietnamese? Let's take Jimmy Carter, the human rights President, right after the war, [in] 1977 he was asked in a press conference, "do we owe any debt to Vietnam?" He said we owe them no debt because the destruction was mutual. 1977 human rights President, was there a comment? A few commented on it. I commented on it, and a couple of other people. Until we rise to a minimal level of civilization, we can't use the term genocide.

*What is power?*

*Individuals like John Mearsheimer, Kenneth Waltz, and Joseph Nye have each defined what they consider to be "power" in international relations. You have criticized power structures and power systems. But I would like to know what you consider to be power in the field of international relations.*

That is pretty straight forward. Power is the ability to issue orders which others have to follow; to the extent that you can do that, you have power. The orders do not have to be verbal. It can be actions, so if you can invade Iraq, worst crime of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and you get no censure or no reaction for it—that is power.

*Truth and Reconciliation Commissions*

*In the aftermath of conflicts, to what extent are truth and reconciliation commissions a viable form of achieving justice and accountability?*

I think they make sense in many situations. For example, take South Africa, there were horrible crimes committed under apartheid. But to try to punish people for

those crimes would have torn the society to shreds and undermined any hope of progress and development, so a decision was made by the ANC—which I think is understandable—to avoid direct punishment and to settle for a truth and reconciliation commission to expose the nature of what happened, so at least it is kind of understood. Same was done in Central America, Brazil, and East Timor. Take East Timor, which was, if the term genocide has any meaning, what Indonesia did in East Timor, with the backing of the United States, Britain, other western countries, even Sweden, that comes about as close to genocide as anything since the Second World War. East Timor, finally, won its independence. Should they carry out war crimes trials against Indonesia, Australia, United States, and others? Or should they try to mend the fences with Indonesia and maybe settle for a truth and reconciliation commission? I think the latter, which is what they are doing. They have to live in the world, right?

Let us take where we happen to be sitting right now. The native population suffered a migrant crisis of an incredible kind, not the kind that we talked about, a migrant crisis where the immigrants come in with the intention of exterminating and expelling the population. That is not what we call a crisis, but that is what happened here. There are remnants of the people that used to live here. They have a reservation in Cape Cod and naturally, should they institute war crime trials against the people who live in their homes? It would not make a lot of sense. It would make a lot of sense to bring out understanding of what happened to call for reparations and so on, but not war crimes trials. It just means nothing in these circumstances. Is it genocide? The population of this territorial United States, the time the colonists arrived, nobody knows for sure, maybe 10 million or something like that. By 1900, when there was census, there were about 200,000. The Western hemisphere had about 80 million people when Columbus arrived, and pretty soon about 90 percent of them were gone.

### *Anarchism*

*I think as an anarchist, in the long term, you believe that centralized political power ought to be eliminated and turned down to the local level, so what role (if any) would federalism play in your long term vision of anarchism?*

The general anarchist pictures—at least within the tradition I associate myself with—are highly federalist, but they assume that they are based on the notion of voluntary association. So there should be self-determination in all institutional

structures of life. But voluntary associations could extent to regions and countries, internationally, that is a kind of federalism supported from below. I think it makes good sense in a complex world.

*Pitasanna Shanmugathas graduated, in June 2018, from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and Criminology.*

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# **Gijsbert de Reuver & Stephan Sanders (red.) ~ Gevaarlijke gekken?**



Ills. Joseph Sassoon  
Semah

Speelt de impact van een gevaarlijke gek alleen op kleine schaal of kan de gevaarlijke gek ook de samenleving en de geschiedenis veranderen? Wordt de geschiedenis gemaakt door de enkeling of is ze de uitkomst van onvermijdbare structuren en onomkeerbare processen?

Deze vragen stonden centraal bij Gijsbert de Reuver en Stephan Sanders toen ze

in 2017 een reeks lezingen organiseerden voor het Instituut voor Interdisciplinaire Studies over een aantal historische en hedendaagse figuren, die nu in *Gevaarlijke gekken?* zijn gebundeld. De auteurs geven geen definitie van gevaarlijke gekken, maar hanteren het begrip als een 'sensitizing concept'.

De eerste twee hoofdstukken bieden inzicht vanuit de psychologie op de vraag 'wat is gek?' aan de hand van het classificatiesysteem DSM-5 en met bijzondere aandacht voor de 'casus' Trump. Zo onderzoeken Aleksander Korzec en Mecheline H.M. van der Linden of Donald Trump een narcistische persoonlijkheidsstoornis heeft. Ze constateren via de dimensionale DSM-methode dat dat inderdaad het geval is.

Paul Brill analyseert in zijn essay Trump vanuit een historische en politieke invalshoek en ziet bij Trump eveneens narcistische trekjes, maar vindt het riskant om daaruit uitspraken te doen over zijn geschiktheid als president.

De andere essays beschrijven onder meer Vladimir Poetin, Mao Zedong, Sepp Blatter, Ulrike Meinhof en Slobodan Milosevic. Wat zijn hun persoonlijke, politicologische en historische achtergronden en wie inspireerden hen? Hoe voeren zij hun macht uit? Kunnen ze worden gedefinieerd als 'gevaarlijke gekken?'

Vladimir Poetin wordt door Eva Cukier beschreven in zijn ontwikkeling van een onbelangrijke spion, die opklom tot tsaar en nu de grote ontregelaar is van het Westen. Een mythisch figuur, ook in Rusland waar niets meer is wat het lijkt.

Jan van der Putten vraagt zich in zijn essay af hoe je Mao Zedong die voor de meeste Chinezen samen met de eerste keizer de grootste man uit de Chinese geschiedenis, een gevaarlijke gek kunt noemen, zeker nu Mao 2.0 Xi Jinping China's huidige sterke man is.



Sepp Blatter wordt door Ruud Stokvis niet gekenmerkt als gevaarlijke gek maar meer als slachtoffer van de moderne voetbalindustrie, die wordt beheerst door media, grootkapitaal en politiek.

Jacco Pelkelder volgt Ulrike Meinhof vanuit haar persoonlijke en politieke motivaties en schetst hoe zij op het eind van haar leven antisemitische uitspraken doet.

Raymond van den Boogaard geeft een analyse van Milosevics rol in de Balkanoorlog en typeert hem als een van de eerste nieuw type autocraat, die het taboe op het nationalisme doorbrak. Poetin, Erdogan, Orban,

Kaczynski, maar ook Trump zijn hem schatplichtig. Van den Boogaard sluit zijn essay af 'Als je hem als een gevaarlijke gek wilt zien, dan zijn de gekken nu in ruime mate onder ons.'

'Gevaarlijke gekken' is vooral een pleidooi voor waakzaamheid en voor gematigd pessimisme, aldus de auteurs. 'De geschiedenissen van deze gevaarlijke gekken laten zien welke kant het op zou kunnen gaan. Ze kunnen fungeren als een soort gevaarlijke herinnering. Wij hopen dat dit boek in die zin corrigerend werkt.'

*Gijsbert de Reuver* was tot voor kort docent aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam en hij is verbonden aan bureau Kadans.

*Stephan Sanders* is columnist, presentator, essayist en auteur. Hij studeerde filosofie en politieke wetenschappen.

Gijsbert de Reuver en Stephan Sanders (red.) -Gevaarlijke gekken? - Uitgeverij Amsterdam University Press, 2018 - ISBN 978 94 6298 7715

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# Noam Chomsky: Moral Depravity

# Defines US Politics



The US midterm elections of November 6, 2018, produced a divided Congress and essentially reaffirmed the existence of two nations in one country. But they also revealed, once again, the deep state of moral and political depravity that prevails in the country's political culture — at least insofar as political campaigns go. In the exclusive interview below, world-renowned scholar and public intellectual Noam Chomsky discusses how the major issues confronting the United States and the world at large were barely addressed by the majority of candidates of both parties.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, with people still arguing about winners and losers from the 2018 midterm elections (and there is clearly a lot to say about what those elections mean), what do you consider to be the most striking features of the latest manifestation of American democracy in action?*

*Noam Chomsky:* The most striking features are brutally clear.

Humanity faces two imminent existential threats: environmental catastrophe and nuclear war. These were virtually ignored in the campaign rhetoric and general coverage. There was plenty of criticism of the Trump administration, but scarcely a word about by far the most ominous positions the administration has taken: increasing the already dire threat of nuclear war, and racing to destroy the physical environment that organized human society needs in order to survive.

These are the most critical and urgent questions that have arisen in all of human history. The fact that they scarcely arose in the campaign is truly stunning — and carries some important, if unpleasant, lessons about our moral and intellectual culture.

To be sure, not everyone was ignoring these matters. They were front and center for those who are constantly vigilant in their bitter class war to preserve their immense power and privilege. Several states had important ballot initiatives addressing the impending environmental catastrophe. The fossil fuel industry spent huge, sometimes record-breaking, sums to defeat the initiatives — including

a carbon tax in the mostly Democratic state of Washington — and mostly succeeded.

We should recognize that these are extraordinary crimes against humanity. They proceed with little notice.

The Democrats helped defeat these critically important initiatives by ignoring them. They scarcely mentioned them “in digital or TV ads, in their campaign literature or on social media,” a [New York Times survey](#) found. Nor, of course, were they mentioned by the Republicans, whose leadership is dedicated to driving humanity off the cliff as soon as possible — in full knowledge of what they are doing, as easily demonstrated.

The Times article goes on to explain that “Environmental activists and political scientists say it is a reflection of the issue’s perpetual low ranking among voters, even Democratic voters, and of the intense polarization along party lines that has developed around global warming.” The article failed to add that this assessment is an incredible indictment of the country and its political, social, economic and media institutions, all of which, so the assessment claims, have sunk to such a level of depravity that the question of whether organized human society can survive in any minimally tolerable form, in the near future, is of little consequence.

Whether that unspoken indictment is correct, we cannot be sure. It is perhaps of some significance that one Democratic candidate, Sean Casten, flipped a Republican district while [making impending climate disaster the centerpiece of his campaign](#).

There is plenty of competition for moral depravity in the current remarkable moment of human history. Perhaps the prize goes to a bureaucracy, maybe in honor of Kafka: Trump’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Right in the midst of the campaign, it produced a detailed study calling for an end to regulations on emissions, with a rational argument: extrapolating current trends, it turns out that by the end of the century the game will be over. Automotive emissions don’t contribute very much to the catastrophe, so there isn’t any point trying to limit them.

In brief, let’s rob while the planet burns, putting poor Nero in the shadows.

This surely qualifies as a contender for the most evil document in history. Again, not an issue in the campaign.

There have been many monsters in the past ... but it would be hard to find one who was dedicated to undermining the prospects for survival of organized human society, not in the distant future — in order to put a few more dollars in overstuffed pockets.

It's hard to find words to describe what is happening before our eyes.

The same is true of the second truly existential threat: nuclear war. A few weeks before the election, Trump announced that the US is withdrawing from the INF treaty, which eliminated short-range missiles deployed in Western Europe and Russia — extremely hazardous weapons, which have only a few minutes flight-time to Moscow, posing a decapitation threat, a sudden attack that would destroy any possibility of response. That, of course, sharply increases the danger of a nuclear response to warnings given by automated systems that have often failed in the past, thus ending all of us.

Anyone familiar with the record knows that it's a virtual miracle that we have so far avoided terminal nuclear war. The threat, which was already grave, was heightened by the Trump nuclear posture review that authorized new destabilizing weapons and lowered the threshold for nuclear attack. This latest move increases the threat further. Scarcely a mention on the campaign trail or in coverage.

The US is withdrawing from the treaty on the grounds that China is not a partner and that the Russians have violated it — they in turn claim that the US has violated it. It's plain how to address these problems: through inspections and diplomacy, neither of which has been attempted. Rather, let's just blithely increase the threat of total destruction. And let's ignore all of this in the vast outpourings during the political campaign.

Again, we have to ask some serious questions about the prevailing moral and intellectual culture — and about the urgency of providing remedies, very soon.

Let's put aside what are merely the most significant questions in human history, and turn to what is within the realm of discussion.



A striking fact about the election is that it once again demonstrated the failure of the Democratic Party as a whole to deal with issues that matter to working people. While working-class people of color largely supported the Democratic Party, even more than before, the party lost the non-college educated white population. What's more, it seems to be of little concern, at least to Democratic Party leaders, the "Wall Street Democrats" as they are sometimes called. They were exultant about their successes in the affluent suburbs, where normally Republican voters were disgusted by Trump's vulgarity. Whether they come naturally or are feigned, Trump's antics help keep his white working-class constituency in line while his party stabs them in the back at every turn, meanwhile serving its real constituency, great wealth and corporate power, with impressive dedication.

The betrayal of working-class America could hardly be clearer, though fortunately, some are breaking free of the treachery. One positive feature of the midterms was the success of a diverse group of young progressive candidates, mostly women — a tribute to the popular activism of recent years, and a hopeful sign for the future, if it can expand and flourish.

On the surface, it seems that Trump's success with much of the voting constituency can be attributed to racist and xenophobic appeals, particularly concerning the imminent threat of "invasion" by hordes of terrorists and criminals approaching our borders that he focused his tantrums on up to the election - then dropping the topic when it was no longer needed to rally the faithful.

Few seem to have recalled that Trump was pulling a leaf from Reagan's playbook. In 1985, our intrepid leader strapped on his cowboy boots and declared a national emergency because Nicaraguan troops were a two days' drive from Harlingen, Texas — and people didn't collapse in laughter. Trump made a similar move in warning that if people fleeing from misery and oppression (misery and oppression for which we are largely responsible) reach our borders they'll try to kill us all. Heavily armed militias travelled to the border to back up the thousands of troops deployed to defend us, and it seems to have worked. Surveys report that people did vote for Trump because only he could save us from destruction by these criminal hordes. That also carries some lessons.

But when we ask why Trump's strategy works, we find something deeper, which extends pretty much worldwide, with particularities from place to place. In

conditions of economic distress, a sense of hopelessness, justified contempt for institutions, and understandable anger and resentment about what is being done to them, people can become easy prey to demagogues who direct their anger toward scapegoats, typically those even more vulnerable, and who foster the symptoms that tend to rise to the surface under such circumstances. That's been happening, worldwide. We see it in election after election in many countries, and in other ways.

In the US, working-class people have suffered 40 years of stagnation while wealth concentrates in very few hands, leading to staggering inequality. The Democrats have ignored all this, and worse, have carried forward the neoliberal policies that took off with Reagan and Thatcher and have imposed these consequences, by design. And for the designers, the neoliberal programs have been brilliantly successful, in ways that we need not review here.

Despite low unemployment, wage growth, after a rise in 2014-15, is now barely keeping up with inflation while corporate profits are skyrocketing, particularly for the predatory financial institutions, which emerged from the crisis for which they were responsible even richer and more powerful than before. A side effect is that the country's wealth is being shifted from R&D, innovation and product development, to financial transactions in the interests of the very rich. Fine for them, but disastrous for the health and future of the society.

The concentration of wealth and enhancement of corporate power translate automatically to decline of democracy. Research in academic political science has revealed that a large majority of voters are literally disenfranchised, in that their own representatives pay no attention to their wishes but listen to the voices of the donor class. It is furthermore well established that elections are pretty much bought: electability, hence policy, is predictable with remarkable precision from the single variable of campaign spending, both for the executive and Congress. [Thomas Ferguson's work](#) is particularly revealing, going far back and including the 2016 election. And that is a bare beginning. Legislation is commonly shaped, even written, by corporate lobbyists, while representatives who sign it have their eyes on funding for the next election.

The midterms highlighted other ominous developments. The Republicans increased their Senate majority — with barely 40 percent of the votes cast. Right now, 60 senators are elected by states with 25 percent of the population, which

means some 15 percent of the vote (mostly rural, white, religious, skeptical of science, heavily armed). And the tendency is increasing. It's hard to see how some form of civil conflict can be avoided unless the Democrats reverse course sharply and become a political party that doesn't simply abandon the working class to its bitter class enemy, as they have done for 40 years.

*How do we explain the fact that while US politics seems nastier, more polarized and more divided than any other time in recent history, both parties stay away from addressing the most critical issues facing the country and the world at large?*

In 1895, the highly successful campaign manager Mark Hanna famously said: "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember what the second one is."

Those who control the wealth of the country have their own priorities, primarily self-enrichment and enhancement of decision-making power. And these are the priorities that prevail in a neoliberal democracy with the annoying public dismissed to the back rooms where they belong.

The CEOs of major banks surely understand the extraordinary threat of environmental catastrophe but are increasing investment in fossil fuels because that's where the money is. Like the energy corporations, they are hardly eager to support candidates warning of the serious crimes they are committing. Lockheed-Martin and its cohorts are quite happy to see vast increases in the military budget and are surely delighted with such declarations as the Trump administration's [new National Defense Strategy](#), just [released by the US Institute of Peace](#) (lacking a sense of irony, the bureaucracy is quite happy to caricature Orwell).

This somber document warns that our dangerously depleted military, which almost overwhelms the rest of the world combined, might not be able to prevail in a two-front war against Russia and China. Of course, neither military industry nor the distinguished authors of the report believe that such a war could even be fought without terminal destruction, but it's a great way to siphon taxpayer dollars away from absurdities like health and education and into the deserving pockets of the captains of industry and finance.

Not many political figures will dare to dismiss such awesome threats to our security.

As for the nastiness, it's largely a result of the drift to the right of both parties during the neoliberal years, the Democrats becoming what used to be called "moderate Republicans" (or often worse) and the Republicans drifting off the spectrum, with devotion to wealth and corporate power so extreme that they cannot possibly win elections on their actual policies. They have therefore been compelled to mobilize voting constituencies on "cultural issues," diverting attention away from actual policies. To keep them in line, it's natural for the leadership to demonize the political opposition as not merely wrong but intent on demolishing their most deeply held values — and for the latter to resort to contempt for the "deplorables." Soon antagonisms degenerate to warfare.

There are many illustrations of how the Republican leadership has sought to organize a voting constituency, some of which we've discussed before. One revealing case is [abortion rights](#). In the '60s, the Republican Party was strongly pro-choice, including the leadership (Reagan, Ford, George H.W. Bush and others). Same with voters. In 1972, two-thirds of Republicans believed abortion to be a private matter, with no government involvement.

Nixon and his cohorts realized that they could attract the Catholic vote, traditionally Democratic, by adopting an anti-abortion plank. Later in the '70s, evangelicals began to organize for political action. Among their demands was maintaining segregated schools. Republican operative Paul Weyrich recognized an opportunity. An open call for segregated schools wouldn't work, but if the Republican Party pretended to oppose abortion, it could pick up the huge evangelical vote, now a core part of Trump's voting base. The leadership accordingly shifted to passionate "pro-life" advocates, including those who it is sometimes believed had some character and honesty, like Bush I, who shifted along with the rest.

Meanwhile the actual constituency of the Republican Party remains great wealth and corporate power, even more dramatically so under Trump. It is quite an achievement to serve this actual constituency with dedication while maintaining a hold on the voting base.

As their voting base shrinks, Republican leaders understand that the GOP is becoming a minority party, which is why they are so dedicated to finding modes of voter suppression and packing the courts with reactionaries who will support their efforts.

It should also be noted that popular opinion differs from the party leadership on many central issues. But as already mentioned, since the majority of the population is disenfranchised, it doesn't matter much. To take just one example, for 40 years of polling the population has strongly favored higher taxes on the rich — as taxes on the rich decline.

*Bernie Sanders was re-elected to the Senate while his protégé Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won a smashing victory over her Republican opponent for New York's 14th District and became, in fact, the youngest woman elected to Congress. In fact, there are now probably as many Democratic Socialists in the House as there are conservative Democrats, so the question is whether progressives should go on to form a third party or try to change the Democratic Party from within. What's your take on this matter?*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with all of its extreme flaws, the US constitutional system was a major step forward in democratic participation as compared with Europe. Even the concept "we the people," though grossly misleading, was a conceptual breakthrough. Over the years, however, by comparative standards the system increasingly ranks as quite regressive. It is doubtful, for example, that Europe would admit a country with the US system as a new member. In particular, the system is radically rigged against any challenge to the governing duopoly. To develop a basis for a third party would require a serious and sustained effort in popular mobilization — not impossible, but not now on the horizon. There do seem to be possibilities to shift the character of the Democratic Party, at least back to its modern New Deal origins, and beyond (it already is considerably beyond in some respects as a result of the civilizing effect of the activism of the '60s and its aftermath).

There are possibilities for development of independent parties, beginning at the local level, adopting fusion policies for more general elections, perhaps gaining enough traction to take part more actively in the political system.

But we should never forget that electoral politics, while not to be dismissed, should not be the prime focus of serious radical political action, which aims to change the basic institutions that undergird the political system, to dismantle hegemonic ideologies, and to help develop the kind of mass consciousness that must be the basis for badly — even desperately — needed social and political change.

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*C.J. Polychroniou* is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [\*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change\*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at Truthout and collected by Haymarket Books.

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## **Spinoza ~ Ethica, work without obstacle**



Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

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