

# Noam Chomsky: Ocasio-Cortez And Other Newcomers Are Rousing The Multitudes



*Noam Chomsky*

A quick glance around the world today reveals that politics almost everywhere — from the federal government shutdown in the US to the power struggle in Venezuela and from Macron’s crisis in France and UK’s Brexit nightmare to the Israeli-Iranian rivalry – are engulfed in a state of uncertainty and turmoil. Meanwhile, oligarchy is replacing democracy as the widening social and economic gap between rich and poor continues unabated. So, who rules the world now? The US is in a state of relative decline, but neither Russia nor China has the capacity to control global developments. How do the super-rich and corporations factor into this equation? In this exclusive interview, world-renowned linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky provides penetrating insights into some of the most critical developments going on in the world today.

*C.J. Polychroniou: After 35 days of a partial government shutdown, Trump signed a three-week funding bill but without securing money for the border wall. Leaving aside for the moment the surrealist nature of contemporary US political life, do you detect some hidden political strategy behind Trump’s funding conflict over the border wall with the Democrats?*

*Noam Chomsky:* There’s a political strategy, but I’m not convinced that it’s hidden. With Trump, everything is pretty much on the surface. There have been constant efforts by political analysts to discern some deep geostrategic or

sociopolitical thinking behind his performances, but they seem to me unconvincing. What he does seems readily explained simply on the well-grounded assumption that his doctrine is simple: ME!

Trump understands that he has a primary constituency — extreme wealth and corporate power — and that he has to serve its interests or he's finished. That task has largely been assigned to the Ryans and McConnells, who have performed it admirably. Profits are skyrocketing, real wages are barely increasing despite low unemployment, regulations that might limit greed (and help mere people) are being dismantled, and the one legislative achievement — the tax scam — put lots of dollars in the right pockets and created a deficit that can be used as a pretext to undermine benefits. All is working smoothly — with analogues worldwide.

But Trump must maintain enough of a voting base to stay in power. That requires posturing as the defender of the ordinary guy against hated “elites” (always suppressing the true “masters of mankind,” to borrow Adam Smith’s phrase for the merchants and manufacturers who were “the principal architects” of policy). This act is helped along by such figures as Rush Limbaugh, who instructs his tens of millions of followers that they should beware of “the four corners of deceit: government, academia, science and media,” institutions that “are now corrupt and exist by virtue of deceit.” So, he argues, just listen to ME.

Meanwhile Trump must rise to the defense of the masses from awesome threats, chief among them now the hordes of “rapists,” “murderers” and “Islamic terrorists” he says are being mobilized down south to storm across the border and slaughter decent law-abiding white Christian Americans. We must therefore have a “beautiful wall” — which *they* will pay for. Trump promised that, and to back down would not only betray the trembling masses but also be a defeat, which his ego cannot tolerate.

The game is not really new. After all, the revered Ronald Reagan bravely donned his cowboy uniform and declared a National Emergency to protect the country from the Nicaraguan army, supposedly poised to destroy us all only two days’ drive from Harlingen, Texas. Trump is only carrying it further, helped by the fading of such infantile notions as “truth” — or “false realities,” to borrow Jared Kushner’s innovation. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s admonition that policymakers must be “clearer than truth” has long passed into obsolescence. They can do far better in the atmosphere of “alternative facts” for those liberated from the four pillars of deceit.

I doubt that there is any deeper political strategy.

Furthermore, such performances are rather natural, perhaps even necessary. As both parties have drifted to the right during the neoliberal assault on the population, the Democrats abandoned the working class and became pretty much what used to be called “moderate Republicans” (something that is beginning to change now in promising ways) while Republicans climbed so deeply into the pockets of the super-rich and corporate power that it became impossible for them to gain anywhere near enough votes on their actual policies. Antics of the Trump style fit the requirements, along with a variety of measures to suppress voting and increased reliance on the many regressive aspects of the constitutional system, which by now make it possible for a small minority of white Christian traditional rural older citizens to have effective control of the government. The tendency is increasing and may soon lead to a major political crisis since it is virtually ineradicable given the structure of the Senate, designed by the Framers so that the small states would ratify the mostly unpopular Federal Constitution. A topic for another day.



*Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ~*

*Photo: wikipedia*

*Responding to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's call for measures to tackle climate change, press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders made the incredible statement that climate change should be left to God. Don't you find it utterly mysterious and indeed dangerous that such thinking still prevails among US public officials in the 21st century? And, really, how well do you think that such messages resonate*

*with the American public today?*

Sanders's insight is not new. She is in good company. After all, the former chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, James Inhofe, condemned efforts to address global warming as sacrilege: "God's still up there," he [proclaimed](#), and "the arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous." It seems to work, at least in Oklahoma, where the senior senator has been in office since 1994. Doubtless well beyond Oklahoma, in a society with fundamentalist religious commitments that are far beyond the norm.

Yes, mysterious and dangerous — as is the fact that half of Republicans deny that global warming is even taking place, and of the rest, barely more than half think that humans have some responsibility for it. But there's good news too. Trump's new acting administrator of the EPA, former coal industry lobbyist Andrew Wheeler, agrees that global warming is probably happening — a problem he considers to be an "eight or nine" on a one-to-10 scale of concern, he informed Congress at his confirmation hearings.

*Venezuela seems to be in the throes of a civil war. The US backs Juan Guaidó as interim president, in turn forcing Nicolás Maduro to consider expelling US diplomats, a decision he eventually backed away from, all while the leaders of China, Russia and Turkey slam Trump's stance in Venezuela. First, what's your assessment of what's happening in Venezuela, and, second, why is it that much of the left worldwide continues to support Maduro when it is obvious that he has been a complete disaster?*

Maduro has been a disaster, and the best the opposition has to offer is the self-declared President Juan Guaidó. About him little is known, apart from his great admiration for the neo-fascist Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, whom Guaidó praised for his commitment to "democracy [and] human rights," as illustrated, for example, by his criticism of Brazil's military dictatorship — because it ... didn't murder 30,000 people as in neighboring Argentina, the worst of the vicious military dictatorships that swept across South America from the '60s.

The roots of the Venezuelan disaster go back to failures of the Chavez administration, including its failure to diversify the economy, which is still almost entirely reliant on oil export. Venezuelan opposition economist Francisco

Rodríguez, former chief Andean economist for the Bank of America, notes the failure of the government to set aside reserves during the period of high oil prices so it was at the mercy of international financial markets when prices dropped sharply in 2014 — and has been blocked from access to credit by harsh US sanctions, which have exacerbated the effects of what Rodríguez describes as the “atrocious” mismanagement of the economy under Maduro. [Writing in Foreign Policy](#), Rodríguez observes that the policy of “Starving the Venezuelan economy of its foreign currency earnings risks turning the country’s current humanitarian crisis into a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe.” Arguably that is the purpose, following the Nixon-Kissinger script of “making the economy scream” to undermine the Allende regime. (That was the soft track; the hard track, soon implemented, was brutal military dictatorship.)

The drift toward civil war, with outside interference, is all too apparent. There is still room for negotiations among the contending parties, but it diminishes daily as the crisis deepens. Maduro is digging and Washington is intensifying its intervention, imposing new sanctions and selecting the egregious Elliott Abrams to join Bolton and Pompeo in what has been called [“Trump’s axis of evil.”](#) If skeletons can shudder, many must be doing so in the Central American countries that Abrams helped to ravage during Reagan’s terrorist wars.

*Israel and Iran seem to be moving ever further closer toward a full-blown war. Why are they clashing in Syria?*

Iran joined Russia in ensuring Assad’s victory in Syria, along with Iran’s Lebanese ally Hezbollah. Israel has been bombing Syria regularly. Four months ago the [IDF reported over 200 strikes against Iranian targets](#) since 2017, and they have been increasing since.

Israel, of course, has overwhelming military dominance in the Middle East, even apart from its close alliance with the US, which lavishly funds its military with the most advanced weapons in the US arsenal and even uses Israel to pre-position US weapons. And, of course, Israel is the region’s sole nuclear power, the reason why Washington has regularly blocked international efforts, led by the Arab states and Iran, to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone (furthermore, WMD-free) in the Middle East. That would end any imagined Iran nuclear threat, but it is unacceptable because the primary US client state in the region would have to open its nuclear arsenal to inspection, and those who regard US law as having

some force would have to stanch the flood of military support for Israel.

Iran is not under US control and is therefore an enemy. Furthermore, the US and Israel recognize that Iran is a deterrent to their free resort to force in the region. The same is true of Hezbollah, whose Iranian-supplied missiles target large parts of Israel. The US and Israel have been threatening to attack Iran for years (“all options are open”) in radical violation of the UN Charter (hence the US Constitution), but that is a matter of no concern for lawless states with overwhelming power. And Trump has, of course, escalated the confrontation by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement. An actual invasion of Iran would be too costly and dangerous, but the US-Israel might consider attacking from a distance after somehow neutralizing Hezbollah (which would mean destroying much of Lebanon). The consequences could be devastating.

*In Davos, the multibillionaires expressed annoyance at and even fear of the presence of radical Democrats in the US Congress and their talk of “soaking the rich” on taxes. Has a global financial oligarchy replaced democracy in today’s advanced capitalist world?*

It’s impossible to replace something that has never really existed, but it’s true that the partial democracies of the West have been undermined further by the financialization of the international economy during the neoliberal years. That’s a large part of the reason for the bitterness, anger and resentment, mislabeled “populism,” that is shaking the foundations of the western democracies, where the centrist political parties that have run the political system are crumbling in election after election.

Many analysts have to account for the rise of such “populism” throughout the neoliberal capitalist world on the basis of psychic disorders — in [one respected version](#), impulses “deep in our psyches and bodies beyond matters of fact: physical pain, fear of the future, a sense of our own mortality.” It is, however, not really necessary to appeal to an epidemic of irrationality and “emotional appeals” somehow spreading over the domains subjected to the neoliberal assault of the past generation, including the enormous growth of largely predatory financial institutions with its deleterious impact on democratic systems of governance.

Fear that the “rascal multitude” will threaten the property of the self-designated “men of best quality” traces back to the first modern democratic revolution in 17<sup>th</sup>

century England, and was a major concern of the framers of the US Constitution in its successor a century later. It reappears constantly when there is even a minor threat to overwhelming power, as in the famous Powell memorandum of 1971, which warned that the world is practically coming to an end because of the slight infringement on overwhelming business domination of the society. The influential manifesto, sent to the US Chamber of Commerce, helped set off the harsh counterattack in the years since.

It's not surprising that these fears are surfacing in Davos as a few young Democratic representatives are arousing the rascal multitude again.

For many years, a considerable majority of the US population has favored higher taxes on the rich, while they regularly decline. And now, a few recently elected members of Congress are advocating what the public wants, most vocally Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who even went so far as to [suggest tax rates at a level regarded as optimal for the economy](#) by the most prominent specialists (Nobel laureate Peter Diamond, Emmanuel Saez, among others). Scandalous indeed.

What else can one expect when 26 people now have as much wealth as half the world's population, according to the latest of the regular Oxfam reports on inequality?

No wonder the "masters of mankind" are trembling.

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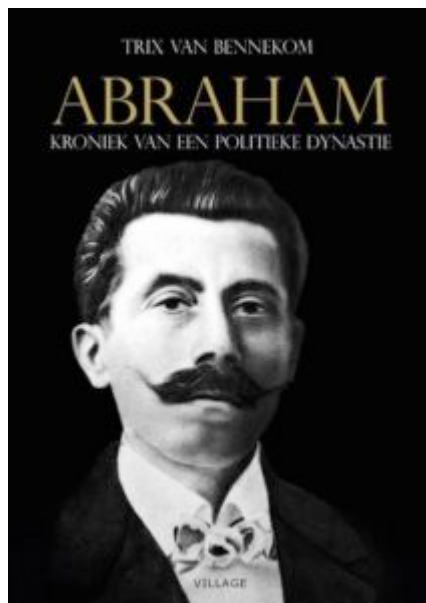
*C.J. Polychroniou* is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction 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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Eén van de families die de geschiedenis van Bonaire mee bepaald heeft, is de familie Abraham.

Trix van Bennekom begint het verhaal in de Heilige Vallei in het noorden van Libanon. Die vallei bood meer dan duizend jaar bescherming aan een vroegchristelijke geloofsgemeenschap, de Maronieten.

Daar, in het dorpje Serhel, werd Julian Antonio Abraham geboren in 1870. Deze Julian maakte in 1895 de stap naar de nieuwe wereld. Hij emigreerde naar Amerika. Maar al snel vertrok hij naar Venezuela, om uiteindelijk zich in 1903 op Curaçao te

vestigen.

Binnen de familie Abraham deden diverse verhalen de ronde over hun afkomst. Maar niemand wist van deze achtergrond. Het plezier over de reconstructie straalt van het gezicht van Van Bennekom als ze over deze vondst vertelt. Voor een biograaf is er natuurlijk ook niets mooiers te bedenken. Zo geef je de familie waarover je schrijft haar geschiedenis terug.

Het boek verhaalt over de drie Abrahammen die in de politiek van het eiland een grote rol hebben gespeeld. In de typering van Van Bennekom: Julio, de man van het volk, Toon, de zakenman-politicus en Jopie, de revolutionair.

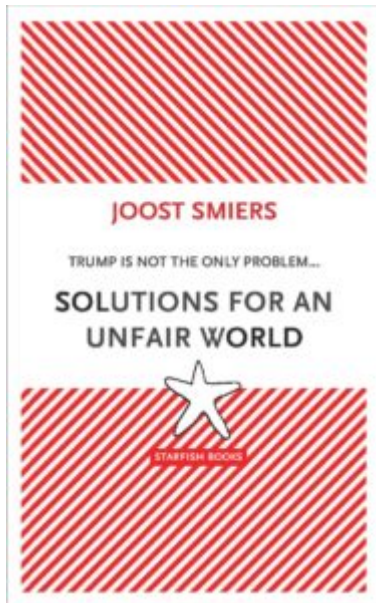
Wat het boek bijzonder maakt, naast de mooi geschreven portretten, is de beschrijving van de tijd waarin de drie politieke carrières zich afspeelden. Van Bennekom verhaalt niet alleen de geschiedenis van het Caribisch gebied, maar ook de verhouding van dat gebied met dat moederland daar in Europa.

De combinatie van de persoonlijke en de grote geschiedenis maakt Abraham een rijk boek.

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# Solutions For An Unfair World ~ Contents & Introduction: Consternation



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## *Consternation*

After November 8, 2016, I have occasionally thought that the governments of civilised nations should recall their ambassadors from the United States, for consultation as it is called; I'd rather say for consideration. Thus far that recall did of course not happen, but consideration is more than ever necessary. After one year it is abundantly clear that Donald Trump's government has not left

relations within the us and the rest of the world untouched.

Obviously, us citizens must set their own course, but as residents of all corners of the world we have to consider what this Trump is doing. Let me mention in this essay a few points that we have to think about. What can we still expect, what have we already seen, how did that affect us, and how can we respond appropriately?

A warning is called for, and it comes from Luigi Zingales – as his name suggests an Italian, who is a professor in the United States. Make the comparison with Berlusconi, he suggests, and deduce lessons from that. *‘Mr. Berlusconi was able to govern Italy for as long as he did mostly thanks to the incompetence of his opposition. It was so rabidly obsessed with his personality that any substantive political debate disappeared; it focused only on personal attacks, the effect of which was to increase Mr. Berlusconi’s popularity.’* (New York Times, 22.11.16)

The purpose of this essay is not to fall into that trap. The election of Trump forces us, more than anything else, to consider some fundamental issues. At the same time we should not be afraid to formulate ambitious solutions. It is still possible to build a civilised, human, just and ecologically sustainable world. We need radical proposals for that, which I would like to present here in five – in principle separately readable – chapters.

I do not start with Trump – no matter how much we are talking about him. I want to focus first on four topics which form the core of the unrest that is raging around the world.

They contain a lot of explosive material. That is – I discuss it in the first chapter – the unmistakable fact that the unrestrained economic and cultural globalisation of the last decades has yielded relatively few winners, but an enormous amount of losers. If we see *‘simplifying right-wing currents’* playing into this, the question arises why the left, with some exceptions, has joined so easily in the neoliberal discourse about the blessings of global free trade, deregulation, privatisation and the degradation of the individual and collective protection of citizen rights, which had been established over the decades.

What is happening now is that the current, unrestrained economic globalisation is meeting with more and more resistance. But it’s not clear how we can get rid of it. The big question for now is which economic conditions we find just, human and

efficient. This means that we need to make radical choices. This is what I am dealing with in the second chapter. Global, regional and bilateral trade treaties must be recalibrated. At the moment the purpose of these treaties is to give corporations and financial institutions the greatest possible freedom of action. But what about protecting the environment, pursuing social justice, enforcing decent working conditions, and finally ending tax evasion and tax fraud?

When rewriting and renegotiating trade agreements between countries, within regions and at a global level, these types of values must have priority. But that is not enough: too big and too powerful, and therefore democratically uncontrollable mega-corporations must be substantially reduced in size, and the intellectual property rights system that gives them so much power and privatises our jointly-built knowledge and creativity must be torn down. The reason for these major changes is also addressed in this second chapter.

This will be followed by a short, groundbreaking third chapter, with a somewhat unexpected proposal. One can find the forces that want to curb globalisation on the veritable left of the political spectrum and in the camp of what I call the simplifying right. For many people this will come as a small shock, but I think it is necessary that representatives of both extremes will start a dialogue with each other, in spite of all the outright differences and animosities between them. What connects them is however more important than what divides them. What connects them is the joint wish that the unrestrained and uncontrollable social, ideological and cultural globalisation will be stopped.

The fourth issue we are emphatically required to consider is something horrible: the threat of war. Weren't we supposed to have peace after the Cold War? Forget it. The arms race is in full swing. After 1989, we thought nato would be an unnecessary organisation, but it gradually became an instrument that has advanced to the borders of Russia. Was that a prudent thing to do? Now that Trump has announced that he does not want to pay any longer for the defence of Western Europe, and that he intends to spend a lot more on armaments for the us, we have to think suddenly about what kind of army we want to have. The choice we have to make is clear: Europe will invest heavily in - above all - new and technologically ingenious weapons, *or* we will have to pay more attention to the organisation of disarmament conferences and weapon reductions. For the sake of clarity, I do not want to suggest that an army in itself is an unnecessary luxury; however, the question is what kind of army that should be. In addition, we

must fear that the motto of years ago ('All nuclear weapons should be removed from the face of the earth') will be more to the point than ever. War and peace, that is the theme of the urgent fourth chapter.

After these major issues, I focus on Trump in the fifth chapter. What does he harbour for the world and how should we respond? It is problematic that the us have always pretended to be a luminous example of what a real democracy is. But then, the emperor is naked. We are even wondering if the presidential elections of 2016 were fraught with fraud. The trumpeting about of lies and half truths is the order of the day. The press, the judicial apparatus, the intelligence services and officials of various government departments are depicted as enemies of the people. *Shame on them!!!!* As a result, the foundations needed for the good and fair functioning of the state are dismantled, which also seems to have been the intention of Trump's former chief advisor Steve Bannon. Trump is further advancing this with his December 2017 tax law, which will lead to the evaporation of the institutions and social provisions of the state. Even for those who had not seen, before the election, that Trump is a man with totalitarian tendencies, it cannot be a mystery anymore: he really is, and more than that.

The most disturbing fact is that we have to fear that this hateful and warlike president is heading towards some form of coup. It is sometimes suggested that the institutions in the us are strong enough to ensure this will not happen. But unfortunately it can happen if the people turn against those institutions. Moreover, the institutions are only as strong as the persons which carry them. In that regard the repulsive and opportunist behaviour of many Republicans does not seem to be hopeful. All this promises little good for the rest of the world. That's why I conclude this chapter with the comment that it is a bit depressed - I can not make it any nicer.

The presidency of Donald Trump can be regarded as a catalyst which has accelerated what was already happening in the world. This essay is an attempt to find our way in all of this, and to think about how we can formulate an answer. It would not do the world any good if that answer would only come from the simplifying right. Of course, given the limited framework of an essay, pressing subjects will be left undiscussed. We can think of what Trump is doing in the Middle East (and in this case not as an entrepreneur). Will the nuclear agreement with Iran remain intact? Do the Palestinians really get the worst of it? Will the relationship between the us and China be one of peace, or will both powers steer

a collision course, with the Philippines suddenly turning up in the economic and military 'game' as a joker? Will North Korea be bombed flat? Have the relations with Mexico lost their apparent innocence, can we rest assured that the Trump government will understand what developments occur in Latin America and in Africa, and will it deal with them prudently? And will the normalization of us-Cuba relations be undone? What makes the situation dangerous, is that Donald Trump improvises as far as foreign policy is concerned.

The biggest risk is that ultra-right forces in the US will do everything in their power to make the United Nations power less. According to Paul Kennedy, in his *The Parliament of Men*, we should be happy to have, in the form of the UN, something that we could not even have dreamt of before the Second World War. '*We have established a town meeting place of the world.*' (2006: 286) That is something very special and we have to cherish it. Despite all its imperfections, with the United Nations we have created a central place where governments from all countries, large and small, can meet and implement international mechanisms.

Within the United Nations we have a multitude of international organisations for many issues in areas such as food, health, culture and education, human rights, and so on. Paul Kennedy: The least you can say, and that's already really extraordinary, is that '*the Great Powers remain inside the tent. At best, they can do great things.*' (2006: 286) Probably I'm not the only one who fears that the Trump-government will not grant the UN the importance that the world needs.

All in all, I suppose that we are confronted by four major challenges. First of all, it is of the utmost urgency that, as I said before, the simplifying right and the veritable left will talk to each other, despite all mutual denunciations of the past. Why this bold proposal? The choice we are facing is the following: either we continue on the path of unrestrained and uncontrolled economic, social and cultural globalisation, or we have to understand that we, as citizens, are losing our grip on our living conditions through this ever-changing globalisation, and that something needs to be done.

The latter is one of the important messages that the simplifying right is taking out on the road. Precisely about that excessive globalisation a conversation is possible with the veritable left. Why do I prefer to talk about the simplifying right and not about the extreme right or the populist right? Whoever argues that the world in which we live has become too complex is not an extremist and not a populist

either. But he or she might be simplifying, because simply calling for protectionism, the closing of borders and the setting off of trade wars, or considering people who are 'different' as the enemy, is not the solution. That shows naivety about the nature of the problems. The contribution to this conversation from the veritable left may be that the economic and financial power of large and powerful companies and financial institutions must be addressed.

Here is a challenging research task for the legal, economic, social, technical and agricultural institutes of universities: how can the transition be made from a global economy that is fullblown neoliberal to human-sized economies, in which companies are embedded in the societies in which they operate?

That is the first, and at the same time fascinating, challenge for the coming years. The second is of a completely different caliber. Whether we like it or not, Europe must engage with Russia, and rather today than tomorrow. The reality is that the current tensions between both parts of the European continent are not only due to Russia - in chapter 4 I will return to that. The choice is either to put even more armaments into play, to take NATO even closer to Russia and to stumble into a war, or to make diplomatic traffic work and to prepare the climate for disarmament conferences. In that respect we do not need NATO, on the contrary.

The third challenge that we need to confront is forced upon us by the rapidly changing political climate in the United States. The US have not yet become a totalitarian state, but human rights and the fundamental principles of the rule of law - and of civilisation - are under severe pressure, and it does not seem that this will suddenly improve, despite the resistance of many parts of the population. Slowly I get the strange feeling that Europe is surrounded by countries - now possibly also the US - that do not have many scruples about human rights and the active respect for the rule of law. That realisation charges us with the responsibility to signal every day all the tendencies that threaten to undermine and oppose the rule of law and human rights here in Europe as well. It turns out that a well-organised society is not an inviolable possession.

The fourth challenge also refers to the United States. Since the inauguration of Donald Trump as president the Atlantic alliance is being tested more and more day after day, by his style of governance as well as by the content of his policy in areas such as the environment, trade, financial traffic, armaments, nuclear weapons and NATO. Whatever one thinks about this policy, Europe must



assume that the self-evidence that used to exist in the relationship with the United States since the Second World War has disappeared as snow before the sun. In itself, that could be good, but we can also get it wrong. This means that Europe is forced to redefine its relations with the United States in many areas. That will not be easy, if only because Europe is not a textbook example of unity when it comes to turning into new roads. Still, it will have to.

To make this terrifying concrete: Suppose it is not only so that Trump cs. have been in touch with certain circles in and around the Kremlin. The need to research this is urgent and it is not unthinkable that this leads to the impeachment of the 45th president of the US. Suppose as well that the elections as such have been sabotaged to the detriment of Hillary Clinton – the New York Times has used such words (22.3.17). Then it might be concluded that the presidential elections of 8 November 2016 have been hijacked, and that the legitimacy of the presidency of Donald Trump is at stake, as well as that of his potential successor. In the New York Times of March 24, 2017, Nicholas Kristof speaks of '*A smell or treason in the air.*' High treason. If that is the case, there should be new presidential elections in the US. In Chapter 5 I will return to that. What will this bring about? We have to fear the worst. I'm not saying this will necessarily happen, but it is not an unthinkable scenario, and we should be prepared for that.

In this essay I will be frugal with citations and the names of authors, but of course I am in debt to many commentators who have helped me, both before and after November 8, 2016, to distinguish between essentials and side issues. At the end of my essay there is a list of my sources of inspiration, and there I thank my friends who have helped me to stay on track.

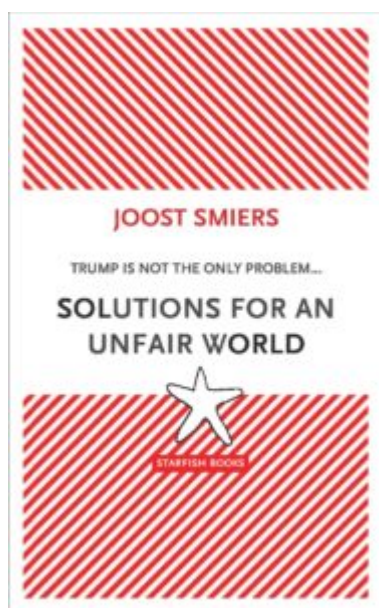
There are nearly two hundred countries in the world. Most of them have periodic elections, or something that looks like that. The results of these – as far as I follow them – can make me happy or sad, but even in countries that enjoy my special attention the elections have never put my life on its head. However, that has been the case with the arrival of Trump.

I reached maturity in a time of mutual trust and great expectations – expectations about equality, respect for others, concern for the climate – without being afflicted with the idea that a particular country or people is better than any other. Is this perspective disappearing?

My friends and I, and all the people that have suffered a similar shock as a result of Trump's election, must find our way in a hard and dangerous world that we are not familiar with, but our values have remained unchanged. Hence this essay: an attempt to make the most of it.

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# Solutions For An Unfair World ~ The World In Which We Live Is Too Complex



It is beyond any doubt: for many citizens life in the second decade of the twenty-first century is difficult. Many are burdened with debt. In the United States and, for example, in Spain, residents can be evicted from their homes at any time. The chance that people will find a decently paid job is decreasing. Long-term unemployment is rather rule than exception. Industries are disappearing. Many suburbs need proper maintenance, but it's not happening, and the police there will not always be seen as your best friend. Worst of all perhaps is that the social safety nets, which have helped people through difficult times in their lives, are becoming increasingly wide-meshed. You often are on your own, in an environment in which you suspect - or are convinced - that immigrants are driving you out of the housing and job market, and have easier access to social services. The neighbourhood in which you live has less social cohesion than before, and mutual trust is gone. Daily life has almost no certainties anymore.

Of course we do not know this precisely, but the shaming of the political elite that is the order of the day may have something to do with this. After all, is it not the responsibility of politics to provide citizens with a safe and secure existence?

When we think about this, some paradoxes stand out. First of all, there is hardly

any anger directed at the business establishment. The leaders of big companies always claim to be the true leaders of the free world, but if something goes wrong in society - and that is really the case now - they are not held responsible. Secondly, by confronting the political elites angry citizens make it abundantly clear that they expect a lot of care from the government. Despite decades of neoliberalism - which advocated the perishing of the state - for many citizens the state still seems to be the entity that needs to keep society in order.

And the third paradox is that citizens have chosen time and again for political leaders who, according to the principles of neoliberalism, have denied the state the financial and organisational means of realising something for individual citizens and the society as a whole. At the same time the state should look after jobs and pensions, affordable health care, safety and everything that gives life perspective. In the absence of resources and competence, states, and thus politicians, can not provide all these things under neoliberal regimes. Nevertheless, the state is expected to deliver protection and social security to its citizens. After all, markets can only flourish if the state is strong enough to make life liveable for its citizens.

The relative impotence of the state to provide citizens with security in their lives is in stark contrast with the power that big companies have acquired over the course of several decades. These are companies that have grown into transnational corporations. Their structure is usually so complex that it is hardly understood what they do - anywhere in the world - and what the consequences might be. They can regard any form of regulation as being irrelevant to them and even prevent these rules from being implemented, including by lobbying at a large scale, wherever appropriate. Such transnational corporations act as collaborative entities that secure their interests on a worldwide scale.

If there are losers, because of the growing power of companies and the globalisation of our economies, there are also winners. A class conflict of formidable size has arisen: an increasing number of super-rich people is flanked by a small part of the population that is affluent, able to travel and having interesting work - the young urban professionals. But even their security of life is not guaranteed; they can be sacked any minute, and then it does not seem to matter that they once had a fantastic job.

On the use of the word class conflict nowadays rests a big taboo, as if the

difference between the very rich and the very poor has no economic origins. It is as if it does not matter that there is a significant inequality in opportunities and wealth. What matters to many people is what is happening close to home. For example, when they meet people in the street whose roots lie elsewhere. Cultural contrasts and inconveniences – which are real in some situations – overshadow the other distinction: between a life that offers little perspective and the horn of plenty that some people can enjoy, say the sunny side of the street.

By furthering the globalisation of companies and financial institutions, and by freeing markets and economic traffic between countries, the idea was that there should be prosperity for everyone in every corner of the world. As could be expected, this did not happen. But something else did: the relationships between people have become harsher; people are sometimes fiercely opposed to each other. This is not surprising. Neoliberalism maintained that everybody should look after his or her own interests, so people should not expect too much collective solidarity. They must compete almost permanently with each other, and if possible treat others and society to a nasty trick. Taxes are no longer something you pay, be it grudgingly, because you know what they are for; paying taxes has become something for idiots. Additionally, the concept of the citizen – and the dignity associated with it – has been replaced by the concept of the consumer. What for are we on earth, according to neoliberalism? To buy and sell.

In his beautiful essay *Discomfort* essayist Bas Heijne writes about the permanently dissatisfied citizen who is used to being approached as a consumer and who has no room for any sense of community. For people who primarily have to deal with the economic and social disadvantages of globalisation, it is hard to swallow that their desires will not be realised: *'These citizens are used to getting their way, they have been promised that they can make their own world; what does not satisfy their desires causes their disinterest, or, if they feel thwarted, their anger. These citizens are diva's, utterly egocentric and pampered, intolerant to other views, essentially for everything that is perceived as different.'* (2016: 65, 6)

This statement is pretty bold. But if you put it next to the nearly endless possibilities that the rich of this planet have, it is true. There is no reason for them to be furious, because their desires and the realisation of them are lying along the same route. At the same time it is not in their interest that there will be a class struggle. Nevertheless, the anger of the losers of the merciless economic

competition will have to focus on something, on people who are perceived to be guilty of their loss. Then they will soon arrive at people in their own neighbourhood who are different. It does not matter if the other is a migrant, a homosexual, a Jew, an Arab, a Muslim, a Mexican or a self-conscious woman: so many flavours, so many options to be angry, depending upon the cultural sensitivities which lead a dormant existence in any particular society. Thus, Trump and his fellow-thinkers act as pyromaniacs. It's not hard to stir these animosities and to make the flames flare up.

Perhaps only this is surprising: even then there is no trace of the idea that the main distinction is not that between you and your neighbour, near or far, but that everything should turn around the antithesis between classes. A bizarre example: in December 2016 it appears that top soccer players, like Cristiano Ronaldo, evade taxes on a large scale. For his fans, that's no problem: *'Anyone in Spain with money would do exactly the same.'* (NRC Handelsblad, December 5, 2016)

The blame for the shortcomings - either real or purely perceived as such - can also be given to foreign powers. Trade relationships that are unfair, or branded as such, may be the spark to the tinder. The world is getting ever more disordered. There are many issues in the world that are too complex to comprehend and control. They can cause tensions between countries, until they are no longer containable, after which they will be followed by wars. The image of the enemy has been given so much magic power that, under the great enthusiasm of the populations, armies can be sent to the battlefield and cyber attackers make overtime. *Peace in our time.*

Which leaders of important countries dare to recognise that wars - for example, between the US and China - are no longer unthinkable, and that peace is no longer self-evident? They even make threats with it.

So we have arrived at a crucial point in history. It could happen that governments will rouse their citizens, after which wars of enormous magnitude could occur. Here's a task for global peace movements: make people around the world aware of the fact that armed conflicts and cyber attacks on an unprecedented scale can actually become like the familiar scenes of Hollywood movies. These latter ones have to be restricted a little bit anyway. It's not a good idea to put war in the imagination of people: the step from fiction to reality is quickly made, as if reality is the same as fiction. Don't we live in the post-truth

era?

Just warning for the threat of violence is not enough. It is time for us to realise that the world in which we live has become too complex and is exceeding the human scale. Communication networks are no longer controllable and will be targeted by anyone who wants to hurt and disrupt societies. Transnational companies do what they think their shareholders want from them, without any regard for fundamental societal interests – think of the climate, social care, fair competition, research on what is urgently needed, decent wages and strong unions. Investments in innovations involve ever-increasing costs, without the actual costs being outweighed by the benefits: the law of reduced profitability. On the other hand, investments are being made in robots, which will only increase unemployment. Robots do not come out of the blue. It is a choice to do large-scale research on them. For example, there is little or no investment in research into renewable energy sources and the limitation of the use of raw materials.

Systems are becoming increasingly complex: those of producing companies, transport chains, political structures, the European Union, intellectual property rights and the ‘theft’ thereof, stock markets, the energy supply, climate control, high-speed capital, trade agreements, sanctions, and criminality of all stripes. This turmoil of complexities is now reaching its limits. Democratic control over all those elusive processes threatens to become illusory. No society can function if it suffers from excessive complexity.

We must acknowledge that this complexity, which does not make our lives any better and safer, is largely human-made. Granted, new transport and communication technologies have taken down boundaries and made processes unclear. But it was not a law, set in stone, that the removal of trade barriers, from the 1980s and 1990s, and the introduction of new communication channels would unfold in the way we have witnessed. The importance of unregulated global markets was made crucial. The problem with it – and with the principle of free trade, proclaimed by neoliberalism – is that these markets are not – or hardly – embedded in our societies. There is simply no global society, and certainly no global democracy.

In ordinary circumstances *national* markets are being managed by national politics and supervised by special authorities. But in the *global* context, where companies can do what they want, issues that are important to citizens in specific

societies are not taken care of. There is no global competition authority, no global supervisor of business operations, no *global lender of last resort*, no global safety net to safeguard citizens from excessive disaster, no global bank that can effectively manage money traffic, no global environmental agency, and no global prosecutor who can institute criminal proceedings in a global court against worldwide operating corporations and those responsible for those companies.

Because of neoliberalism governments have come to a disadvantageous position in relation to the markets, and at the global level there are no governments that can act on a level playing field with market parties. But we must make sure that markets and governments are complementary. If we want better and fairer markets, strong governance is required from the public sector. That means: powerful public authorities that are not subordinate to the markets. That's what we lack nowadays.

Economic, social and cultural globalisation has become an imperative: that requires from all countries that they pursue the same policy in areas such as making room for companies without too many obstacles; imposing taxes on companies which are as low as possible; deregulating markets; privatising knowledge and creativity according to the high standards of intellectual property rights; limiting the power of unions; introducing equal rules for food safety, as coarse-grained as possible, introducing environmental measures, and admitting the free movement of capital – as if local interests regarding the circulation of capital are not essential for the well-being of local economies.

Is it possible to imagine that the current hyper-globalisation will be tamed by a global government which is at least as strong? Asking the question is answering it. If even the European Union – in spite of all its good intentions – does not succeed in adopting a common policy in all these areas against the self-centered power of large companies, which is seen by people of all walks of life as beneficial and enriching, it is impossible to think that such a strong government could exist on a global scale. The differences between countries and the needs of their populations differ in such a way that *one size fits is all* is impossible and especially undesirable. As is apparent now, there is an increasing abhorrence of super-national structures.

If democracy at a global level is out of reach, the illusion must also be relinquished that open global markets and unrestricted financial traffic are



desirable. So we have to think of something else. It is good to maintain the benefits of limited globalisation and not to retreat into protectionism; that has led to the Second World War, so we don't want that anymore.

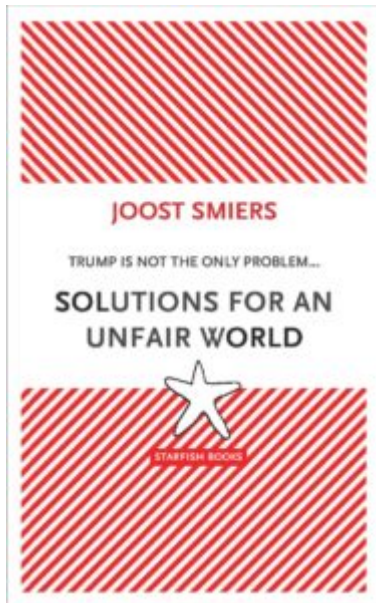
What matters now is to explicitly recognise the benefits of national diversity, I would almost say to celebrate them. The authority of national governments must be restored to primacy, in all areas of economic, social and cultural life, not to mention the fields of environment, agriculture and energy. Markets work best if they are well-organised, for the benefit of citizens, for the profit expectations of entrepreneurs who should not be overrun by strong market parties, for the protection of property rights, and for all that is needed to give citizens – who are not consumers for a change – the feeling and, above all, the certainty that their interests will be taken seriously, and that the income differences between the rich and the poor will not become too extreme.

If the parties of the simplifying right claim to be the only ones to have put globalisation on the agenda, the center-left needs to be blamed. Together with the parties of the conservative right, the social democrats in Western Europe and the Democrats in the United States have cleared the way for uncontrolled globalisation. They have embraced the idea and practice of uncontrolled and unregulated global free markets, which did not have to protect anything that was weak and vulnerable. Was it not under the presidency of Bill Clinton that the watershed, which banks had to apply between their clients' money and their own economic activities, was made undone?

This watershed was the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act, which – until Clinton cancelled it – kept the banks under control. After that, the banks could speculate with their customers' money – slicing and selling risks until no-one was responsible anymore – until the system collapsed in 2008. Under Obama, with the 2010 Dodd Frank Act, an attempt was made to tame the banks again. One of the electoral promises of Donald Trump was to undo this law, or at least to make it weaker, and that is what he has done. This will lead to the next financial crisis caused by banks that have too much freedom and can not quit speculating.

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# Solutions For An Unfair World ~ We Have To Bring Trade Under Democratic Control



If we realise that the escalating economic, cultural and social globalisation has brought us too few blessings, the question is what we need to do, and especially what we can do now. First of all we have to think about the abundance of trade treaties between individual countries – there are thousands of them – and between groups of countries in certain regions – think of NAFTA, CETA, the formerly intended TPP, TTIP, and indeed the European Union –, and about what is governing them at a global level, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In principle, all those treaties have to be revised radically. However, before we come to this, we need to

acknowledge that generally it is beneficial that such treaties are aimed at reducing (further) import and export taxes. But that should not be overdone: countries have the right to protect certain sectors of their economy, perhaps only for a certain period of time. It is also useful if such treaties contribute to the joint determination of industrial standards, even though small differences are not insurmountable. But after that, the problems come.

Let's start with the bilateral and regional trade treaties. What is necessary now and in the future is that such trade agreements are being formulated in such a way that they put an end to matters such as tax dumping, environmental degradation, the enormous size and complexity of corporations, and social exploitation. So far, all those trade treaties are silent about the protection of what is of vital importance for citizens and their society – now and in the future. Therefore, those treaties must be renegotiated, reformulated and concluded again. Indeed, that is a hell of a job, which can only succeed if two conditions are met. Firstly, lawyers, economists and social scientists at universities – and scientists at technical and agricultural universities as well – need to set up major research programs to consider how the transition will unfold from the current trade treaties, which undermine democracy and hurt citizens, to trade treaties

that serve the interests of these citizens, bringing democracy and market to a good balance.

Secondly, one can imagine that such radical changes can only take shape if substantial sections of the population are committed to this, persistently and well-considered. Perhaps what is being proposed here is not a far-off-their-bed show for the simplifying right. And why could reforming the trade relations between countries – which would bring back national priorities to citizens – not be the basis for alliances between what is called the populist right – what I have previously referred to as the simplifying right – and a from its neoliberal bent returning left? I'll get back to that.

The World Trade Organisation is a case in itself, and we should get rid of it. At the end of World War II, in Bretton Woods (US) the groundwork was laid for a global trading system that combined two important issues. Trade between countries can bring prosperity to everyone, so let's take care that the obstacles to it – such as high tariffs – will gradually decrease, people thought. But at the same time individual countries should also have enough room to arrange their own economic and financial lives in such a way as to meet their own needs. Without entering into details here, it can be safely said that this system was more or less functioning well within gatt, the *General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade* – the global trade treaty that arose from Bretton Woods and that was applied from World War II onwards. Until the neoliberal ideology and the interests of the ever-growing transnational companies penetrated into all pores of international trade and gatt was transformed into an instrument in which *one size fits all* was prevalent. In 1995 this became the WTO.

The purpose of this World Trade Organisation is to ensure uniform rules between countries for all conceivable products, trade movements and services, and to enforce compliance by special secret courts within the WTO, with the possible punishment that a winning country can set trade sanctions against the loser. The wto was established in the early nineties of the last century. Ever since the start, it became increasingly difficult to reach agreement between almost all countries of the world, among other things about the elimination of trade barriers for tens of thousands of products and services, and about the introduction of standards for this. For several years, no progress has been made at all.

Nevertheless the WTO is still there. The WTO is acting as a sort of economic

world government, but as we have seen, a *democratic* world government, in which citizens of the whole world can really influence economic processes, is completely unthinkable. It is impossible even to assume that so many different interests and desires of citizens from all countries can be regulated in a democratic way. Thus, the WTO needs to be reduced and rescaled to what GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, was meant to be from the Second World War until the early 1990s: an instrument to promote trade between countries, and to make national and local protection as optimal as possible, serving important social, ecological and cultural values. This also means that this can only be realised if public awareness grows that trade is a means of achieving a goal and not an end in itself.

We are not yet there when national and local interests become the focal point for trade relations between countries. Of course that would be a big step forward, but we would still be faced with the power of big companies operating globally. We already concluded that we are actually empty-handed if we want to submit those companies to global rules. Nevertheless companies can not be left a free hand, trusting that they are meaning well. If we can not control them at the global level, we only have one conclusion: too large, too powerful and too complex companies should be reduced significantly in size and power. To that end I introduce a new form of competition law. (Smiers 2016)

So far, as citizens we just have to wait and see how big and powerful – and thus how uncontrollable – a company will become. However, we must acknowledge that we as citizens have an interest that there will be no economic players more powerful than our states. This means that companies must have a size and a structure that is manageable. If we want to subject them to rules, we must be able to check if these rules are being observed. We also have to be freed from companies that dominate markets, otherwise it is almost impossible for newcomers to acquire a place there. Current competition law only deals with complaints which company A might file against company B. That is not enough. Because we as a society also have a fundamental interest, and that is that companies are embedded in a society which they can not overrule.

That is why I propose a completely new form of competition law, which I call *proactive* competition law. The purpose of this is that the Competition Authority will proactively survey the market. If it is concluded that a particular company has become too dominant or too complex and is not transparent, then that

company must be divided into several smaller parts. Obviously, the Competition Authority must take care that a part of such a split company will not itself become a dominant player again. In addition, companies themselves must indicate in their business plans how they will ensure that they do not become market dominant.

The exciting question is, of course, which Competition Authority may authorize such interventions as the breaking up of over-sized companies. These companies operate at a global level and do not obey regulatory authorities at a national level. This means that in a new treaty on global trade – which has to replace the current WTO – a new global competition law has to be formulated and a new Global Competition Authority has to be established. After all, companies that operate on a global level can only be addressed at a global level. In the 1970s there have been moves in this direction within the United Nations, but under pressure from neoliberalism they were swept away again in the 1980s.

It should be mentioned as well that intellectual property rights – such as patents and copyrights – privatise the knowledge and creativity that we have jointly developed in the course of the centuries. This may sound strange to some people, but for a variety of reasons we must abandon these intellectual property rights. Why? While all newly acquired knowledge and creativity builds on what has been developed earlier, the Intellectual Property Rights system creates a monopoly, so that no-one else can further develop this knowledge and creativity. Socially, we are therefore stealing from ourselves.

Additionally, in the case of a piece of land one can indicate with precise boundaries whose property it is, provided that there is a well-functioning land registry. However, knowledge and creativity are fluid and have no fixed limits. That leads to conflicts, patent wars between companies and very expensive lawsuits, on which money is spent that will not be devoted to the further development of knowledge and creativity. Intellectual property rights also constitute the new time bombs under our financial and economic system. On the stock markets companies are increasingly appreciated on the basis of the value of their patents and copyrights. But that value is guesswork. Nobody can indicate the value of knowledge that is monopolized – and that is exactly what intellectual property rights do. For security and stability in the global economy it is not safe to bet on the prices of the assumed values of intellectual property rights.

What is often overlooked is that western countries will make every effort

imaginable to ensure that patents and copyrights will be enforced as long as possible in a global context – in particular through the treaty on so-called *Trade-Related Aspects of International Property Rights* (TRIPS), and that all the knowledge and creativity that lends itself to this will be included in intellectual property rights as well, thus privatising our *commons* on a large scale. The consequence of this is that (relatively) poor countries, where less knowledge and creativity can be developed and paid for, now have to pay heavily for the use thereof.

However, it is not unthinkable that in those countries – as is happening now in China – in many areas a lot of knowledge and creativity will be developed, fenced off with piles of intellectual property rights. It may very well be that this will eventually be much more than the knowledge and creativity developed in the West. So all of a sudden the West will have to pay for all the necessary knowledge and creativity. The system of strict intellectual property rights that the West now benefits from will then turn against the West itself and become a ballast of unprecedented magnitude.

Intellectual property rights therefore hardly rely anymore on the promotion of the development of knowledge and creativity, but on trade and the thwarting of other companies and countries. Can we do without? Certainly. The starting point is that much research is actually funded with public resources, even though the resulting knowledge is often privatised. In addition, large companies today are less likely to undertake substantial research – and certainly not any research with a social or ecological component: their short-term interests do not allow it. So the solution will be that we have to make a radical separation between research on the one hand, and the production of goods and services on the other. Research will then take place in separate research institutes – in universities or private companies. We fund this research from the general resources.

These research institutes participate in tenders, written by independent and regularly changing committees. All the output of this research is freely available to all. Subsequently, manufacturing companies can get started. One of the major advantages of making a distinction between research and production is that research-projects will be selected on the basis of a variety of social interests – ecological, social, cultural; the demand from companies is only one factor to take into account.

Granted, what we propose turns the world upon its head. But just like we need to cut trade treaties to human size, we have to do the same with companies. The problem we are all confronted with is that it is difficult to imagine that relationships that seem to be persistent can actually change. Even so, it is possible. Who had thought that the Berlin Wall would fall, even one day before the event? Who had thought until the end of the 1970s that neoliberalism would become the dominant ideological and economic force? Even so, it happened. Major social changes often occur in an unpredictable fashion. But keep in mind that they do not come out of the blue. In order to be able to cut holes in the Wall, a lot of work had to be done first in East Germany and the other countries of Eastern Europe, and we cannot accuse the initiators of neoliberalism of laziness.

They had been studying, discussing, building networks and lobbying for thirty years, before their ideology of the free and barely regulated market eventually gained global prominence under Thatcher and Reagan.

Putting enterprise under democratic control again seems to be an unrealistic cause. You may call it a utopia, but is that not the same as making the unthinkable imaginable? Perhaps we will be grateful to Donald Trump, for his wildness and unproductive ideas about protectionism may prove to have been the – probably unintended – catalysts for what I propose: not the abolition of the world economy – that would undo thousands of years of history – but the reintroduction of local and regional enterprise, embedded in society. Then there will be no more super-large companies that can afford their CEO's scandalously high rewards. Because medium-scale and small businesses can never afford that: their bosses can only earn a little more than the average employee, and that's it.

We can not handle the complex corporate world as it now functions; that calls for less globalisation, which should actually be possible.