

Noam Chomsky: To Retain Power, Democrats Must Stop Abandoning The Working Class



Noam Chomsky

The U.S. political system is broken, many mainstream pundits declare. Their claim rests on the idea that Republicans and Democrats are more divided than ever and seem to be driven by different conceptions not only of government, but of reality itself. However, the problem with the U.S. political system is more profound than the fact that Democrats and Republicans operate in parallel universes. The issue is that the U.S. appears to function like a democracy, but, essentially, it constitutes a plutocracy, with both parties primarily looking after the same economic interests.

In this interview, Noam Chomsky, an esteemed public intellectual and one of the world's most cited scholars in modern history, discusses the current shape of the Democratic Party and the challenges facing the progressive left in a country governed by a plutocracy.

C.J. Polychroniou: In [our last interview](#), you analyzed the political identity of today's Republican Party and dissected its strategy for returning to power. Here, I am interested in your thoughts on the current shape of the Democratic Party and, more specifically, on whether it is in the midst of loosening its embrace of neoliberalism to such an extent that an ideological metamorphosis may in fact be underway?

Noam Chomsky: The short answer is: Maybe. There is much uncertainty.

With all of the major differences, the current situation is somewhat reminiscent of the early 1930s, which I'm old enough to remember, if hazily. We may recall Antonio Gramsci's [famous observation](#) from Mussolini's prison in 1930, applicable to the state of the world at the time, whatever exactly he may have had in mind: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

Today, the foundations of the neoliberal doctrines that have had such a brutal effect on the population and the society are tottering, and might collapse. And there is no shortage of morbid symptoms.

In the years that followed Gramsci's comment, two paths emerged to deal with the deep crisis of the 1930s: social democracy, pioneered by the New Deal in the U.S., and fascism. We have not reached that state, but symptoms of both paths are apparent, in no small measure on party lines.

To assess the current state of the political system, it is useful to go back a little. In the 1970s, the highly class-conscious business community sharply escalated its efforts to dismantle New Deal social democracy and the "regimented capitalism" that prevailed through the postwar period — the fastest growth period of American state capitalism, egalitarian, with financial institutions under control so there were none of the crises that punctuate the neoliberal years and no "bailout economy" of the kind that has prevailed through these years, as Robert Pollin and Gerald Epstein [very effectively review](#).

The business attack begins in the late 1930s with experiments in what later became a major industry of "scientific methods of strike-breaking." It was on hold during the war and took off immediately afterwards, but it was relatively limited until the 1970s. The political parties pretty much followed suit; more accurately perhaps, the two factions of the business party that share government in the U.S. one-party state.

By the '70s, beginning with Nixon's overtly racist "Southern strategy," the Republicans began their journey off the political spectrum, culminating (so far) in the McConnell-Trump era of contempt for democracy as an impediment to holding uncontested power. Meanwhile, the Democrats abandoned the working class, handing working people over to their class enemy. The Democrats transitioned to a party of affluent professionals and Wall Street, becoming "cool" under Obama in

a kind of replay of the infatuation of liberal intellectuals with the Camelot image contrived in the Kennedy years.

The last gasp of real Democratic concern for working people was the 1978 Humphrey-Hawkins full employment act. President Carter, who seemed to have had little interest in workers' rights and needs, didn't veto the bill, but watered it down so that it had no teeth. In the same year, UAW president Doug Fraser withdrew from Carter's Labor-Management committee, condemning business leaders — belatedly — for having “[chosen to wage a one-sided class war](#) ... against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young and the very old, and even many in the middle class of our society.”

The one-sided class war took off in force under Ronald Reagan. Like his accomplice Margaret Thatcher in England, Reagan understood that the first step should be to eliminate the enemy's means of defense by harsh attack on unions, opening the door for the corporate world to follow, with the Democrats largely indifferent or participating in their own ways — matters we've discussed before.

The tragi-comic effects are being played out in Washington right now. Biden attempted to pass badly needed support for working people who have suffered a terrible blow during the pandemic (while billionaires profited handsomely and the stock market boomed). He ran into a solid wall of implacable Republican opposition. A major issue was how to pay for it. Republicans indicated some willingness to agree to the relief efforts if the costs were borne by unemployed workers by reducing the pittance of compensation. But they imposed an unbreachable Red Line: not a penny from the very rich.

Nothing can touch Trump's major legislative achievement, the 2017 tax scam that enriches the super-rich and corporate sector at the expense of everyone else — the bill that Joseph Stiglitz termed the [U.S. Donor Relief Act of 2017](#), which “embodies all that is wrong with the Republican Party, and to some extent, the debased state of American democracy.”

Meanwhile, Republicans claim to be the party of the working class, thanks to their advocacy of lots of guns for everyone, Christian nationalism and white supremacy — our “traditional way of life.”

To Biden's credit, he has made moves to reverse the abandonment of working people by his party, but in the “debased state” of what remains of American

democracy, it's a tough call.

The Democrats are meanwhile split between the management of the affluent professional/Wall Street-linked party, still holding most of the reins, and a large and energetic segment of the popular base that has been pressing for social democratic initiatives to deal with the ravages of the 40-year bipartisan neoliberal assault — and among some of the popular base, a lot more.

The internal conflict has been sharp for years, particularly as the highly successful Sanders campaign began to threaten absolute control by the Clinton-Obama party managers, who tried in every way to sabotage his candidacy. We see that playing out again right now in the [intense efforts to block](#) promising left candidates in Buffalo and the Cleveland area in northeast Ohio.

We should bear in mind the peculiarities of political discourse in the U.S. Elsewhere, “socialist” is about as controversial as “Democrat” is here, and policies described as “maybe good but too radical for Americans” are conventional. That’s true, for example, of the two main programs that Bernie Sanders championed: universal health care and free higher education. The economics columnist and associate editor of the London *Financial Times*, Rana Foroohar, hardly exaggerated when she [wrote](#) that while Sanders is considered the spokesperson of the radical left here, “in terms of his policies, he’s probably pretty close to your average German Christian Democrat,” the German conservative party in a generally conservative political system.

On issues, the split between the party managers and progressive sectors of the voting base is pretty much across the board. It is not limited to the relics of social welfare but to a range of other crucial matters, among them, the most important issue that has ever arisen in human history, along with nuclear weapons: the destruction of the environment that sustains life, proceeding apace.

We might tarry a moment to think about this. The most recent general assessment of where we stand comes from a leaked draft of the forthcoming [IPCC study](#) on the state of the environment. According to the report of the study, it “concludes that climate change will fundamentally reshape life on Earth in the coming decades, even if humans can tame planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions. Species extinction, more widespread disease, unlivable heat, ecosystem collapse, cities menaced by rising seas — these and other devastating climate impacts are

accelerating and bound to become painfully obvious before a child born today turns 30.... On current trends, we're heading for three degrees Celsius at best."

Thanks to activist efforts, notably of the Sunrise movement, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey have been able to introduce a congressional resolution on a Green New Deal that spells out quite carefully what can and must be done. Further popular pressures could move it towards proposed legislation. It is likely to meet an iron wall of resistance from the denialist party, which increasingly is dedicated to the principle enunciated in 1936 by Francisco Franco's companion, the fascist general Millán Astray: "Abajo la inteligencia! Viva la muerte!": "Down with intelligence! Viva death."

As of now, the Democratic response would be mixed. The president refuses to support a Green New Deal, a prerequisite for decent survival. Many in Congress, too. That can change, and must. A lot will depend on the coming election.

While all of this is going on here, OPEC is meeting, and is riven by conflicts over how much to *increase* oil production, with the White House pressuring for increased production to lower prices and Saudi Arabia worrying that if prices rise it "[would accelerate the shift toward renewable energy](#)" — that is, toward saving human society from catastrophe, a triviality not mentioned in the news report, as usual.

Going back to the crisis of 90 years ago, as the neoliberal assault faces increasingly angry resistance, we see signs of something like the two paths taken then: a drift toward proto-fascism or creation of genuine social democracy. Each tendency can of course proceed further, reawakening Rosa Luxemburg's warning "Socialism or Barbarism."

It is useful to recall that the primary intellectual forces behind the neoliberal assault have a long history of support for fascism. Just a few years before the assault was launched, they had conducted an experiment in neoliberal socio-economic management under the aegis of the Pinochet dictatorship, which prepared the ground by destroying labor and dispatching critics to hideous torture chambers or instant death. Under near-perfect experimental conditions, they managed to crash the economy in a few years, but no matter. On to greater heights: imposing the doctrine on the world.

In earlier years, their guru, Ludwig von Mises, was overjoyed by the triumph of

fascism, which he claimed had “saved European civilization,” exulting, “The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history.” Mussolini’s “achievement” was much like Pinochet’s: destroying labor and independent thought so that “sound economics” could proceed unencumbered by sentimental concerns about human rights and justice.

In defense of von Mises, we may recall that he was far from alone in admiring Mussolini’s achievements, though few sank to his depths of adulation. In his case, on principled grounds. All worth recalling when we consider the possible responses to the neoliberal disaster.

How do we explain the rise of the progressive left in the Democratic Party?

It’s only necessary to review the effects of the 40-year neoliberal assault, as we have done elsewhere. It’s hardly surprising that the victims — the large majority of the population — are rebelling, sometimes in ominous ways, sometimes in ways that can forge a path to a much better future.

Democrats may need to expand their base in order to keep the House in 2022. How do they do that, especially with the presence of so many different wings within the party?

The best way is by designing and implementing policies that will help people and benefit the country. Biden’s programs so far move in that direction — not enough, but significantly. Such efforts would show that under decent leadership, impelled by popular pressure, reform can improve lives, alleviate distress, satisfy some human needs. That would expand the Democratic base, just as social-democratic New Deal-style measures have done in the past.

The Republican leadership understands that very well. That is why they will fight tooth and nail against any measures to improve life, with strict party discipline. We have been witnessing this for years. One of many illustrations is the dedication to block the very limited improvement of the scandalous U.S. health care system in the Affordable Care Act — “Obamacare.” Another is the sheer cruelty of Republican governors who refuse federal aid to provide desperate people even with meager Medicaid assistance.

That’s one way to expand the base, which could have large effects if it can break through Republican opposition and the reluctance of the more right-wing sectors

of the Democratic Party (termed “moderate” in media discourse). It could bring back to the Democratic fold the working-class voters who left in disgust with Obama’s betrayals, and further back, with the Democrats’ abandonment of working people since the reshaping of the party from the ‘70s.

There are other opportunities. Working people and communities that depend on the fossil fuel economy can be reached by taking seriously their concerns and working with them to develop transitional programs that will provide them with better jobs and better lives with renewable energy. That’s no idle dream. Such initiatives have had substantial success in coal-mining and oil-producing states, thanks in considerable measure to [Bob Pollin’s grassroots work](#).

There is no mystery about how to extend the base: pursue policies that serve peoples’ interests, not the preferences of the donor class.

I worry about reports about some immigrant neighborhoods showing [increased enthusiasm for the ideals and values expressed by the Republican Party](#) of Donald Trump. Do you have any insights?

The evidence that this is happening seems slim. There was a slight shift in the last election, but the results don’t seem to depart significantly from the historical norm. Latino communities varied. Where there had been serious Latino organizing, as in Arizona and Nevada, there was no drift to Trump. Where Mexican-American communities were ignored, as in South Texas, Trump broke records in Latino support. There seem to be several reasons. People resented being taken for granted by the Democratic Party (“You’re Latino, so you’re in our pocket”). There was no effort to provide the constructive alternative to the Republican claim that global warming is a liberal hoax and the Democrats want to take your jobs away. The communities are often attracted by the Republican pretense of “defending religion” from secular attack. It’s necessary to explore these matters with some care.

Many Democrats wish to eliminate the filibuster — another Jim Crow relic — because with the wafer-thin majority that they hold it is impossible to pass into law landmark pieces of legislation. However, given today’s political climate, and with the possibility looming on the horizon that Trumpist Republicans will retake the House in 2022, aren’t there risks in abolishing the filibuster?

It’s a concern, and it would have some weight in a functioning democracy. But a

long series of Republican attacks on the integrity of Congress, culminating in McConnell's machinations, have seriously undermined the Senate's claim to be part of a democratic polity. If Democrats were to resort to filibuster, McConnell, who is no fool, might well find ways to use illegal procedures to ram through acts that would establish more firmly the rule of the far right, whatever the population might prefer. We saw that illustrated recently in his shenanigans with the Garland-Gorsuch Supreme Court appointments, but it goes far back.

Political analyst Michael Tomasky [argued recently](#), quite seriously, that the Senate should be abolished, converted to something like the British House of Lords, with a peripheral role in governance. There has always been an argument for that, and with the evisceration of remaining shreds of democracy under Republican leadership, it is an idea whose time may have come, at least as a goal for the future.

When all is said and done, the U.S. does not have a functional democratic system, and it is probably best defined as a plutocracy. With that in mind, what do you consider to be the issues of paramount importance that progressives, both activists and lawmakers, must work on in order to bring about meaningful reform that would improve average people's lives, as well as enhance the prospects of a democratic future?

For good reason, the gold standard in scholarship on the Constitutional Convention, by Michael Klarman, is entitled "The Framers' Coup" — meaning, the coup against democracy by a distinguished group of wealthy, white, (mostly) slave owners. There were a few dissidents — Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (who did not take part in the Convention). But the rest were pretty much in agreement that democracy was a threat that had to be avoided. The Constitution was carefully designed to undercut the threat.

The call for plutocracy was not concealed. Madison's vision, largely enacted, was that the new government should "protect the minority of the opulent against the majority." Many devices were introduced to ensure this outcome. Primary power was placed in the (unelected) Senate, with long terms to insulate Senators from public pressure.

"The senate ought to come from and represent the wealth of the nation," Madison held, backed by his colleagues. These are the "more capable set of men," who

sympathize with property owners and their rights. In simple words, “those who own the country ought to govern it,” as explained by John Jay, First Justice of the Supreme Court. In short, plutocracy.

In Madison’s defense, it should be recalled that his mentality was pre-capitalist. Scholarship recognizes that Madison “was — to depths that we today are barely able to imagine — an eighteenth century gentleman of honor,” in the words of Lance Banning. It is the “enlightened Statesman” and “benevolent philosopher” who were to exercise power. They would be “men of intelligence, patriotism, property and independent circumstances,” and “pure and noble” like the Romans of the imagination of the time; men “whose wisdom may best discern the true interests of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” They would thus “refine” and “enlarge” the “public views,” Banning continues, guarding the public interest against the “mischiefs” of democratic majorities.

The picture is richly confirmed in the fascinating debates of the Convention. It has ample resonance to the present, quite strikingly in the most respected liberal democratic theory.

Madison himself was soon disabused of these myths. In a 1791 letter to Jefferson, he deplored “the daring depravity of the times” as the “stockjobbers will become the pretorian band of the government — at once its tools and its tyrant; bribed by its largesses, and overawing it by clamors and combinations.” Not a bad picture of America today. The contours have been sharpened by 40 years of bipartisan neoliberalism, now challenged by the progressive base that Democratic Party managers are working to subdue.

With all its anti-democratic features, by 18th-century standards, the American constitutional system was a significant step toward freedom and democracy, enough so as to seriously frighten European statesmen who perceived the potential domino effect of subversive republicanism. The world has changed. The plutocracy remains in place, a terrain of struggle.

Over time, popular struggles have expanded the realm of freedom, justice and democratic participation, not without regression. There are many barriers that remain to be demolished in the political system and the general social order: bought elections, the “bailout economy,” structural racism and other attacks on

basic rights, suppression of labor.

It is all too easy to extend the list and to spell out more radical goals that should be guidelines for the future, all overshadowed by the imminent threats to survival.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, climate change, 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 scores of 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 Arabic, Croatian, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are [*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; *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change*, an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books (scheduled for publication in June 2021).

Humanity Needs To Declare Independence From Fossil Fuels



The Declaration of Independence, the work of a five-person committee appointed by the Continental Congress, but with Thomas Jefferson as the most vocal figure of the values of the Enlightenment on this side of this Atlantic being the primary author and upon the insistence of none other than John Adams himself, is one of the most important documents in the history of democracy and of political progress.

Built around Locke's political epistemology, the Declaration of Independence signaled to the world that the old political order based on the divine right of kings and political absolutism in general was illegitimate and that, subsequently, people have the right to overthrow a regime that fails to protect the "self-evident" rights of every individual, which are "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

The Declaration of Independence, the official birth certificate of the American nation and the most progressive document of its time in support of popular sovereignty, was officially approved by the Congress on July 4, 1776, but eventually it would end up becoming an inspiration to future generations both in the United States and around the world. For example, the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" issued by early feminists at the July 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was modelled after the Declaration of Independence. Ho Chi Ming's speech on September 2, 1945, proclaiming the Independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam, began with nearly an exact quote from the second paragraph of America's 1776 Declaration of Independence.

Today, the United States and the world at large need a new declaration of independence—a declaration of independence from fossil fuels.

The planet is on the verge of unmitigated disaster due to global warming. The Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, brought about a series of major transformations in energy usage— first from wood to coal and then to oil and gas. And, to be sure, for more than a century, from the 1870s to the 1970s, to be exact, the world experienced unprecedented economic growth, although the relationship between economic growth and fossil fuel energy consumption is not straightforwardly linear for both developed and emerging economies.

However, for several decades now, we have also known of the effects of fossil fuels on the environment and climate change. The burning of fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gasses trap heat in Earth's atmosphere, causing global warming. The Earth's average global temperature has risen by 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit, according to NASA's Godard Institute. Some regions of the world, however, have already seen average temperatures rise by more than 2 degrees Fahrenheit because temperatures increase at different speeds, with land areas warming faster than coastal areas.

Global temperatures matter. Rising global temperatures have major effects on numerous fronts, ranging from air quality and rising sea levels to the frequency of environmental events such as forest fires, hurricanes, heat waves, floods, droughts, and so on. The climate crisis also impacts on human rights and becomes a driver of migration. And last but not least, there are economic costs associated with the climate crisis as rising temperatures affect a wide range of industries, from agriculture to tourism. It's estimated that the economic damage caused by natural disasters for the most recent decade (2000-2009) was approximately \$3 trillion-more than \$1 trillion increase from the previous decade.

Make no mistake about it. The world's most authoritative voice on the climate crisis, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (ICPP), has been warning us for several years now that the world is at serious risk, and that time is running out to save the planet. Yet, very little has been done so far to address our climate crisis, although we know what needs to be done.

What needs to be done is to move the world economy to net-zero emissions and 100 clean energy. This requires, starting immediately, to implement a radical plan for the phasing out of fossil fuels and the concomitant implementation of a green global infrastructure development plan. In this massive undertaking, the public sector needs to become the vanguard of the transition to clean and renewable energy, with the citizenry fully on its corner and against those greedy capitalists who continue to put profits ahead of people and the planet's future.

We have the technical know-how as well as the available economic resources to make the transition to a clean energy future. Details of this undertaking are spelled out, for instance, in the recent publication of [*Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet*](#) (Verso 2020)

by Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin.

Moreover, the transition to a clean energy future does not mean the end of economic growth. On the contrary, a Global Green New Deal, as University of Massachusetts-Amherst economics professor Robert Pollin has sketched out in the aforementioned book, will generate millions of new and good-paying jobs in both the developed and the developing countries. The economic benefits of a green new deal are quite significant, while the costs of not doing a green new deal are catastrophic.

In sum, the time has come for the people of the United States—and indeed of citizens all over the beautiful blue planet—to announce a new Declaration of Independence: a declaration of independence from fossil fuels. This is our only chance to move towards a sustainable future, our only chance to avoid the highly likely probability of a return to barbarism due to the collapse of organized social order brought about by mitigating global warming.

Degrowth Policies Cannot Avert Climate Crisis. We Need A Green New Deal



Robert Pollin

The Green New Deal is the boldest and most likely the most effective way to combat the climate emergency. According to its advocates, the Green New Deal will save the planet while boosting economic growth and generating in the process millions of new and well-paying jobs. However, a growing number of ecological economists contend that rescuing the environment necessitates “degrowth.”

To the extent that a sharp reduction in economic activity is a positive goal, “degrowth” requires overturning the current world order. But do we have the luxury to wait for a new world order while the catastrophic impacts of global warming are already upon us and getting worse with each passing decade?

World-renowned progressive economist *Robert Pollin*, distinguished professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, is one of the leading proponents of a global Green New Deal. In this interview, he addresses the degrowth vs. Green New Deal debate, looking at how economies can grow while still advancing a viable climate stabilization project as long as the growth process is absolutely decoupled from fossil fuel consumption.

C.J. Polychroniou: Since the idea of a Green New Deal entered into public consciousness, the debate about climate emergency is becoming increasingly polarized between those advocating “green growth” and those arguing in support of “degrowth.” What exactly does “degrowth” mean, and is this at the end of the day an economic or an ideological debate?

Robert Pollin: Let me first say that I don’t think that the debate on the climate emergency between advocates of degrowth versus the Green New Deal is becoming increasingly polarized, certainly not as a broad generalization. Rather, as an advocate of the Green New Deal and critic of degrowth, I would still say that there are large areas of agreement along with some significant differences. For example, I agree that uncontrolled economic growth produces serious environmental damage along with increases in the supply of goods and services that households, businesses and governments consume. I also agree that a significant share of what is produced and consumed in the current global capitalist economy is wasteful, especially much, if not most, of what high-income

people throughout the world consume. It is also obvious that growth per se as an economic category makes no reference to the distribution of the costs and benefits of an expanding economy. I think it is good to keep in mind both the areas of agreement as well as the differences.

But what about definitions: What do we actually mean by the Green New Deal and degrowth?

Starting with the Green New Deal: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that for the global economy to move onto a viable climate stabilization path, global emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) will have to fall by about 45 percent as of 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050. As such, by my definition, the core of the global Green New Deal is to advance a global project to hit these IPCC targets, and to accomplish this in a way that also expands decent job opportunities and raises mass living standards for working people and the poor throughout the world. The single most important project within the Green New Deal entails phasing out the consumption of oil, coal and natural gas to produce energy, since burning fossil fuels is responsible for about 70 – 75 percent of all global CO₂ emissions. We then have to build an entirely new global energy infrastructure, the centerpieces of which are high efficiency and clean renewable energy sources — primarily solar and wind power. The investments required to dramatically increase energy efficiency standards and to equally dramatically expand the global supply of clean energy sources will also be a huge source of new job creation, in all regions of the world. These are the basics of the Green New Deal as I see it. It is that simple in concept, while also providing specific pathways for achieving its overarching goals.

Now on degrowth: Since I am not a supporter, it would be unfair for me to be the one explaining what it means. So here is how some of the leading degrowth proponents themselves describe the concept and movement. For example, in a 2015 edited volume titled, [*Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*](#), the volume's editors Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis write that, "The foundational theses of degrowth are that growth is uneconomic and unjust, that it is ecologically unsustainable and that it will never be enough." More recently, a 2021 paper by Riccardo Mastini, Giorgos Kallis and Jason Hickel, titled, "[A Green New Deal without Growth?](#)," write that "ecological economists have defined degrowth as an equitable downscaling of throughput, with a concomitant securing of wellbeing."

It is instructive here that, in this 2021 paper, Mastini, Kallis and Hickel do also acknowledge that degrowth has not advanced into developing a specific set of economic programs, writing that “degrowth is not a political platform, but rather an ‘umbrella concept’ that brings together a wide variety of ideas and social struggles.” This acknowledgement reflects, in my view, a major ongoing weakness with the degrowth literature, which is that, in concerning itself primarily with very broad themes, it actually gives almost no detailed attention to developing an effective climate stabilization project, or any other specific ecological project. Indeed, this deficiency was reflected in a 2017 interview with the leading ecological economist Herman Daly himself, without question a major intellectual progenitor of the degrowth movement. Daly says in the interview that he is “favorably inclined” toward degrowth, but nevertheless demurs that he is “still waiting for them to get beyond the slogan and develop something a little more concrete.”

This lack of specificity among degrowth proponents leads to further problems. For example, degrowth supporters, such as Mastini et al. in their 2021 paper, are clear that they support the transformation of the global energy system along the lines that I have described above, from our current fossil fuel-dominant system to one whose core features are high efficiency and clean renewable energy sources. Yet in fact, building out this new energy system will obviously entail massive *growth* of the global clean energy system, just as it will equally entail the phasing out — or *degrowth*, if you prefer — of the global fossil fuel energy system. In my view, it is more useful to be specific about which sectors of the global economy will certainly need to grow — e.g., the clean energy system — while others, like fossil fuels, contract, as opposed to invoking sweeping generalities about degrowth. We can extend this point. For example, I am sure degrowth proponents would favor major expansions in access to public education, universal health care, high-quality affordable housing, regenerative agriculture and the share of the Earth’s surface covered by forests.

In focusing on some critical specifics, I would also add that there is no way that a general project of degrowth can put the global economy onto a viable climate stabilization path. With the COVID-19 recession, the global economy just went through a powerful natural experiment to demonstrate this point. That is, during the pandemic in 2020, the global economy contracted by 3.5 percent, which the International Monetary Fund [described as](#) a “severe collapse ... that has had

acute adverse impacts on women, youth, the poor, the informally employed and those who work in contact-intensive sectors.” In other words, the pandemic produced an intense period of global “degrowth.” This recession did also produce a decline in emissions, as entire sections of the global economy were forced into lockdown mode. But the emissions decline amounted to only [6.4 percent over 2020](#). Remember, the IPCC tells us that we need to cut emissions by 45 percent as of 2030 and be at zero emissions by 2050. If the COVID recession only yields a 6.4 percent emissions reduction despite the enormous levels of economic pain inflicted, clearly “degrowth” cannot come close, on its own, to delivering a 45-percent emissions cut by 2030, much less a zero emissions global economy by 2050.

Those who see the Green New Deal not only as the most effective strategy to tackle global warming but also as an engine growth, such as yourself, rely on the concept of “decoupling,” by which is meant the absolute decoupling of economic growth from carbon emissions. However, degrowth advocates seem to be arguing that there is no empirical evidence for absolute “decoupling,” and that it’s highly unlikely that it will ever happen. How do you respond to such claims?

Let’s recognize, to begin with, that people are still going to need to consume energy to light, heat and cool buildings; to power cars, buses, trains and airplanes; and to operate computers and industrial machinery, among other uses. As one critical example here, in low-income economies, delivering adequate supplies of affordable electricity becomes transformative for people’s lives, enabling them, for example, to adequately light their homes at night rather than relying on kerosene lanterns. As such, it should be our goal to greatly expand access to electricity to low-income communities throughout the world, while we are also driving down CO2 emissions to zero. The solution is for energy consumption and economic activity more generally to be absolutely decoupled from the generation of CO2 emissions. That is, the consumption of fossil fuel energy will need to fall steadily and dramatically in absolute terms, even while people will still be able to consume energy resources to meet their various demands. The more modest goal of *relative decoupling* — through which fossil fuel energy consumption and CO2 emissions continue to increase, but at a slower rate than overall economic activity — is therefore not a solution. Economies can still continue to grow while still advancing a viable climate stabilization project as long as the growth process is absolutely decoupled from fossil fuel consumption.

Is absolute decoupling impossible to accomplish within the context of economic growth? To date, we have seen some modest evidence — and I do stress the evidence is *modest* — of absolute decoupling taking place. For example, between 2000 and 2014, [21 countries](#), including the U.S., Germany, the U.K., Spain and Sweden, all managed to absolutely decouple GDP growth from CO2 emissions — i.e., GDP in these countries expanded over this 14-year period while CO2 emissions fell. This is a positive development, but only a small step in the right direction.

The way to deliver a much more rapid pattern of absolute decoupling is, of course, to build out the global clean energy economy, and to do so quickly. This is a feasible project. By [my own estimates](#), it requires that the global economy spend approximately 2.5 percent of global GDP per year on investments in energy efficiency and clean renewable energy supplies, while the global economy grows at an average rate of about 3 percent per year between now and 2050. The [International Renewable Energy Agency](#) and [International Energy Agency](#) recently published studies that reached similar results for the global economy. Focused on the U.S. economy, the energy economists Jim Williams and Ryan Jones also reached a similar result, as part of the [Zero Carbon Action Plan](#) project.

From this and related evidence, I conclude that absolute decoupling is certainly a feasible, though also obviously a hugely challenging, project. But we can't just talk about it, pro or con. We have to make the investments, at 2.5 percent of global GDP per year or thereabouts, every year until 2050, to build the global clean energy economy. If we do that, absolute decoupling will happen. If we don't make those investments, then of course, absolute decoupling becomes an impossibility.

Various ecologically minded activists are also arguing that the Green New Deal relies on the use of massive energy resources, including extensive use of the steel industry, in order to make the transition to a clean, renewable and net-zero emissions economy, and that what is really needed instead is a green revolution of the mind, whereby zero energy living is the ultimate goal. My question is this: Can the Green New Deal deliver 100 percent clean energy?

There are several industries in which energy is consumed intensively. They include steel, cement and paper, along with, obviously, all forms of transportation. But note that these industries are *energy* intensive. They are not

necessarily *fossil fuel energy* intensive. If we succeed, through the Green New Deal, in increasing the efficiency at which these industries consume energy and we also deliver abundant supplies of clean renewable energy, then the problems of dealing with energy-intensive industries can be solved. It's true that there will be some specific areas which will present more difficult challenges. For example, some parts of steel production rely on furnaces that are operating at very high temperatures. Reaching these high temperatures are, to date, difficult to achieve through electricity as opposed to burning coal in a furnace. This problem will need to be solved over time. One likely solution could be to rely on laser technology through which the required high temperatures can be reached with electricity, with the electricity, in turn, being produced through renewable energy.

Another more difficult area is long-distance aviation. To date, we cannot rely on electric batteries to fly planes across the Atlantic Ocean, for example, as we can to drive cars from New York to California. One likely solution here will be to fuel the planes' engines with low-emissions liquid bioenergy, such as ethanol produced from agricultural wastes as the raw material. Battery storage capacities are also likely to be improving significantly with more people focusing on [solving exactly this problem](#). Let's remember that the costs of producing electricity from solar photovoltaic panels have fallen by over 80 percent within the past nine years, and the U.S. Energy Department itself [projects further major declines](#) in just the next five years. Moreover, the International Renewable Agency [reported](#) just recently that, for the first time, 62 percent of all renewable energy sources produced energy at lower costs than the *cheapest sources* of fossil fuel energy.

All of this tells me that achieving absolute decoupling is a feasible project within the framework of a global Green New Deal. The Green New Deal, in turn, is, in my view, the only way through which climate stabilization can become fully consistent with expanding decent work opportunities, raising mass living standards and fighting poverty in all regions of the world.

Source:

<https://truthout.org/degrowth-policies-alone-cannot-avert-climate-crisis-we-need-a-green-new-deal/>

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The IHRA's Careless Conflations On Antisemitism (And Few Alternatives)

Contending Modernities, 2021. In this essay Moshe Behar critiques the recent letter sent by English Secretary of State Gavin Williamson to university chancellors instructing them to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliances' (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.

Behar contends that the definition of antisemitism that the IHRA has put forward is meant to squash legitimate democratic forms of criticism of the state of Israel much more than to help identify and stamp out antisemitism.

I am a non-white Mizrahi Jewish academic who has been studying Israel/Palestine and the history of Jews in the Middle East for two decades. My family hails from Ottoman Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, and the Greek islands of Zakynthos and Corfu. All too many of us were murdered by Nazi *Génocidaires* (and rest assured that we will not forget or forgive).

Precisely because of this scholarly and biographic background I was embarrassed to read [the letter sent by England's Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson](#), to all university vice chancellors. Utilizing an authoritarian tone devoid of understatement, Williamson demanded that all universities in England adopt formally what is called “the working definition of antisemitism” drafted by the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\)](#).

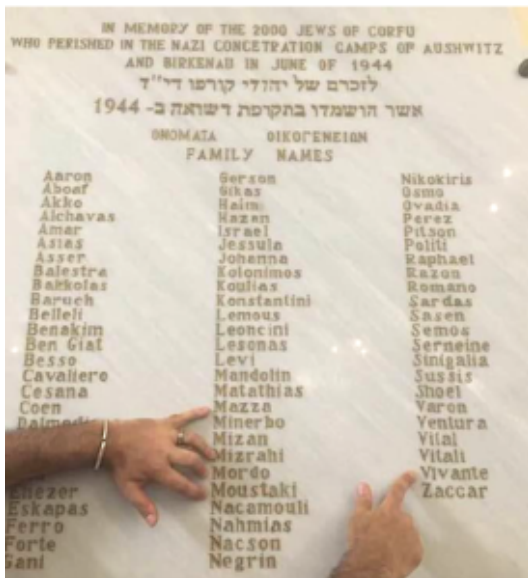


Photo from the Synagogue in Kerkyra/Corfu. Fingers pointing out to families associated with Behar's maternal lineage, Mother's maiden name included.

Born in 1976, Williamson has been a Tory politician for 25 years. He and his party have not been noteworthy for their passionate activism against racism, antisemitism included. Nor did Williamson find it problematic to serve under Boris Johnson, author of *Seventy-Two Virgins* (HarperCollins, 2004), a novel that disappointingly recycled [antisemitic tropes and stereotypical portrayals](#) of Jews and other British minority ethnic groups.

The letter Williamson authored is littered with antisemitic tropes. A non-Jew himself, Williamson first chooses to single out Jews from non-Jews and, in so doing, officially mark Jews as “other.” Embracing the “divide and conquer” colonial approach, he proceeds to divorce antisemitic racism from [similar manifestations of racism](#) with which he is less concerned, including Islamophobia,

Afrophobia/anti-Black racism, misogyny, anti Roma/Gypsy racism, homophobia, and xenophobia vis-à-vis Asians and Arabs.

Most disturbingly, Williamson's letter upgrades the quintessential stereotype of money and Jews to a new level by linking Jews to monetary penalties and potential state sanctions on universities if their managements exercise what is otherwise a simple academic and democratic right to adopt a view and definition of antisemitism that differ from his. The irony of setting Christmas as the deadline for his pseudo-philosemitic mobilization has apparently escaped Williamson altogether.

The IHRA definition that Williamson labors to impose unilaterally defines antisemitism as "*a perception that may be expressed as hatred.*" This reading is vague, restrictive, minimalist, and in the main emotionalist. It bypasses manifestations of antisemitism that are equally, and possibly even more, important than "perception," including oppression, discrimination, exclusion, prejudice, bigotry or other tangible actions. Moreover, a wall-to-wall agreement prevails among the rainbow of scholars of antisemitism that one singular definition of the abhorrent phenomenon does not exist. That is the case precisely as there is no one and only definition for racism, feminism, islamophobia, Judaism, Zionism, Islamism, English nationalism, communitarianism, and forms of bigotry.

There are at least four additional definitions of antisemitism that can guide the work of scholars or activists and that are analytically superior to that of the IHRA: the definition of the [Canadian Independent Jewish Voices](#); that of the British Board of Deputies and the Community Security Trust; and that of the British Jewish Voice for Labour. However, the most scholarly rigorous definition is "[The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#)" (JDA) that was made public today (disclosure: some serious reservations notwithstanding, I'm one of its 200 academic signatories). To be sure, Williamson's top-down state decree of a single definition upon academia let alone one deemed deficient by [hundreds of scholars](#) runs the risk of echoing Soviet Stalinism and American McCarthyism.

And Then There Is Israel

As many as seven of the eleven illustrations that the IHRA definition marshals to exemplify antisemitism relate to post-1948 Israel (of which I happen to be a citizen). The Zionist/Arab matrix dominates the definition and as a result it often

comes across as concerned more with the protection of Israel than the protection of Jews, let alone non-Israeli Jews. As early as 2016 the British Government's own "Home Affairs Committee" found the IHRA's definition wanting; cross-party committee members insisted on formally affixing [two stipulations](#): (1) "It is not anti-Semitic to criticise the Government of Israel, without additional evidence to suggest anti-Semitic *intent*" and (2) "It is not anti-Semitic to hold the Israeli Government to the same standards as other liberal democracies, or to take a particular interest in the Israeli Government's policies or actions, without additional evidence to suggest anti-Semitic *intent* " (italics added).

While it is unclear how precisely such "intent" is to be established or proven let alone by what body or individual/s it is clear that Williamson opted consciously to exclude these two surgical qualifications. That seems an additional testament to his instrumentalization of antisemitism for sectarian conservative ends. [The Governing Bodies and Presidents/Vice Chancellors of at least 48 universities](#) were unable to withstand the ongoing governmental pressure and effectively all endorsed the IHRA definition top-down without staff consultation. For example, my university's management endorsed the definition *with* the Home Affairs Committee's stipulations; [Cambridge](#) and [Oxford](#) did the same. While this too remains unsatisfactory, it is somewhat less misguided than adopting the IHRA definition *as is*.

The definition Williamson insists on imposing carelessly conflates "Jews" with "the state of Israel" and "Judaism" with "modern political Zionism." The original conflation between these identities and phenomena was and remains an inherent organizing pillar of Zionist ideology. Self-proclaimed pro-Israel bodies and individuals [exercise this conflation](#) regularly in texts, actions, and [advocacy](#). It comes as no surprise that this conflation has often been reproduced by Israel's anti-Zionist critics, at times consciously and at other times as a consequence of inexcusable ignorance.

Recent example of irresponsible conflation between British Jews, Zionism, and Israel's belligerent occupation.

The symbiosis between these opposing, yet mutually-empowering, Zionist/anti-Zionist tides yields the most toxic ground for unambiguous manifestations of antisemitism. This is in contrast to cases where straightforward criticisms of Israel including by such organizations as [Amnesty International](#), [Oxfam](#), [Human](#)

[Rights Watch](#), and the [Open Society Institute](#) (established in 1993 by George Soros) have been fancifully labelled as “antisemitic” to delegitimize pro-democratic activism on behalf of Palestinian human and political rights. Three facts that the IHRA definition fails to acknowledge should neither be forgotten nor blurred conceptually: that many Jews are not Zionist; that the majority of Zionists worldwide are not Jewish (including Christian fundamentalists); and that over 20% of Israeli citizens are not Jewish.

Beneficiary of a Double Standard

The IHRA definition which Williamson aims to institutionalize claims that it is antisemitic to apply “double standards to Israel by requiring of it a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.” Viewed dispassionately through a scholarly lens, this formulation echoes what logicians term “the straw man fallacy.”

First, the overwhelming majority of Israel’s critics worldwide focus on its post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and the actions it is continuing to implement there to date. No democracy in the twenty first century holds a disenfranchised civilian population under such brutal occupation while deepening ceaselessly its colonization, implantation of armed civilian settlers, and illegal settlement construction, all based on religious affiliation and differentiation.

Branding as “antisemitic” criticism of Israeli actions pertaining to its occupation—on the ground that this applies a double standard—is Orwellian. The majority of Israel’s critics demand that Israel cease being the beneficiary of a double standard that has exempted it, for over 50 years now, from democratic requirements otherwise applied to, and expected of, all other democracies. The thrust driving this critique is that Israel will act, and be adjudged, in the same way as standard democracies. If that were to happen, this would *remove* Israeli exceptionalism, not create it.

Yet a transition of this sort remains absent. This partially explains why leading (Israeli) social scientists define Israel as a diminished form of [ethnic democracy](#), that is, a state that does not meet the minimal requirements that would permit students of Comparative Politics to define it as a “liberal democracy.” For another (Israeli) school of scholars, the label “democracy” should be avoided altogether for the simple reason that the glove does not fit; they thus define Israel as an

[ethnocracy](#). For yet a third school of thought, Israel lamentably meets the definition of an [apartheid state](#). Two months ago, the single most prestigious and scholarly of all Israel's Human Rights Organizations, B'Tselem, published a report titled ["A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid."](#)

The above constitutes a standard scholarly debate that lacks any inherent link to antisemitism. It therefore should not be interfered with by career politicians for the purpose of policing speech, as [already seems to happen](#). In fact, the principal author of the IHRA definition, Professor Kenneth Stern, explained on many occasions that the definition "was not drafted, and was never intended, as a tool to target or chill speech on a college campus" and that he himself ["highlighted this misuse, and the damage it could do."](#) It is clear that Williamson did not bother to consult Stern or his writings upon issuing his letter.

Israel vs Civic-Liberal Democracies

The IHRA definition Williamson enforces provides assistance to no one when it resolves that "denying the Jewish people their right to self determination" is a form of antisemitism. While such denial can surely assume an antisemitic form, in the majority of cases it assumes instead a straightforward democratic critique. For starters, scholars and non-scholars alike must have the democratic right to question Israel's democratic credentials and self-defined national configuration, as well as those of any other state. Israel rests legally upon the notion that all British Jews, for example including those who have never set foot outside Britain enjoy more individual and collective rights between the Jordan Valley and the Mediterranean Sea than non-Jewish Palestinians who live in this territory, including those who have never set foot outside of it. That is the case not only vis-à-vis stateless Palestinians in the West Bank ([annexed de facto but not de jure by Israel](#)) but also with regards the Palestinian *citizens* of Israel, who comprise 21% of its population. Demands to correct this state of Israeli legal-political affairs are calls to democratize Israel; they are by no means a form of antisemitism.

Another problem with the IHRA's uncritical adoption of Israel's self-indulged "democratic nation" credentials can be illustrated by the fact that both Israeli Jews and non-Jews enjoy equal legal recourse to migrate to Britain and the US and acquire their citizenship. Yet the same democratic feature is nowhere to be found reciprocally in the case of Israel.

An Israeli Jew who marries a non-Israeli Jew from, say, Alaska, enjoys automatically a legal right to naturalize their spouse in Israel; conversely, a non-Jewish *citizen* of Israel who marries a non-Jew from Ramallah (or Alaska) does not enjoy the same equal right to bring their spouse and naturalize her or him. That also means that British or American non-Jews including Palestinian American Christians, Muslims, seculars, and others [have no viable legal pathway to emigrate](#) to Israel, nor to reunite with their indigenous families there, nor to become citizens in Israel.

Yet British or American Jews automatically have this right whether they like it or not. Israel is thus neither a democracy in the ways that Britain or other liberal democracies are, nor does it embody a national configuration that can, or should, remain above interrogation. Non-Jews in general, and Palestinians in particular, who seek to have rights in Israel equal to those bestowed upon Jews would first need to undergo a successful religious conversion to Judaism.

As is the case in other democracies, British immigration laws do not restrict apriori possible migration to Britain on the basis of religious affiliation alone. It is not too hard to imagine what the response of British democrats (Jews among them) would be if the right to migrate to Britain was reserved to non-Jews alone. Another example is that the combined state of legal, national, and political affairs in Israel easily enables non-Israeli Jews to purchase land in Israel even if they are not citizens. For Israeli citizens who are not Jewish [this is effectively impossible to do](#). The Israeli notion of ascribing different rights to different religious groups of both nationals and non-nationals is absent in liberal democracies because it fatally corrodes the defining notions of civic democracy.

It therefore should come as no surprise that for its non-Jewish citizens, Israel is experienced as a Jewish and *undemocratic* state. Many Jews with democratic convictions subscribe to this view with ease. The attempt by many – chief among them Israeli Jewish and non-Jewish citizens for whom democracy is sacrosanct – to remove such discriminatory and unequal conditions and legislation, and, in doing so, to democratize Israel by bringing it nearer the model of a state that is *for all its citizens* (as Britain and the US are for example) does not constitute antisemitism.

The IHRA's stipulation that "denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination" is a form of antisemitism is thus deceptive. It is on standard

democratic grounds not on antisemitic grounds that many oppose the sweeping extra-territorial privilege of non-Israeli Jews to exercise a “national right to self-determination” inside Israel/Palestine that is bestowed upon them at the direct and inevitable expense of the individual and collective rights of non-Jews living in Israel/Palestine.

Let us lastly think of a European or non-European individual who denies “the right to self-determination” to the people of Catalonia, the Basque country, Scotland, Québec, Corsica (or others worldwide). Does this make them by definition racists vis-à-vis the Scots, Catalans, Québécois?

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Source: [Moshe Behar - “The IHRA, Israel, and Antisemitism” \(2021\) - 2021, Contending Modernities](#)

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