

Chomsky And Pollin: COP26 Pledges Will Fail Unless Pushed By Mass Organizing



Noam Chomsky

The 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which takes place in Glasgow from October 31-November 12, will bring together more than 120 world leaders for 12 days of talks aimed at forming an agreement on how to tackle the climate emergency. The expectation is that countries will produce 2030 emissions reductions targets that will secure global net zero by 2050. For that to happen, the phase-out of coal must be accelerated, deforestation must be curtailed and investment in green energy must rise significantly.

The urgency for action at COP26 cannot be overstated. We are running out of chances to save the planet from a climate catastrophe. But in order for the stated goals of COP26 to be attained, it is imperative that narrow views of national interest be put aside and great powers steer clear of geopolitical confrontations. Indeed, without international cooperation, the continued use of fossil fuels is set to drive societies across the globe into climate chaos and collapse.

So, what can we expect from COP26? Definite action or, as Greta Thunberg recently put it, more “blah, blah, blah?” In this expansive and eye-opening interview, leading scholars Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin share their thoughts and insights about the upcoming global climate summit and what must ultimately be done to save humanity and the planet from a global climate catastrophe. Noam

Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and currently Laureate Professor of Linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. Chomsky, one of the most cited scholars in history and long considered one of the U.S.'s voices of conscience, is joined by one of the world's leading economists of the left, Robert Pollin, Distinguished Professor and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Chomsky and Pollin are co-authors of the recently published book *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy to Save the Planet*.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, COP26 is believed to be our "last best hope" for meaningful action to tackle the climate crisis. Why is COP26 so important? And wasn't pretty much the same thing said about COP21?

Noam Chomsky: It was indeed, and correctly. The concept of "last best hope" keeps narrowing. What's the last best hope at one point is gone later, and the remaining last best hope becomes far more difficult to realize.

That's been true since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, ratified by 192 nations, but not the U.S. The Senate would not accept it. George W. Bush pulled out completely; later Canada, did as well. Kyoto was the last best hope in 1997. If the U.S. had joined, the task of escaping devastating climate change would have been far easier.

By 2015 (the Paris Agreement, COP21), the "best hope" was much more remote and difficult to realize. Again, the U.S. Senate blocked it. More precisely, the plan was for a verifiable treaty, but Republicans would not accept that, so it was reduced to toothless voluntary agreements. And shortly after, Trump pulled out completely. Biden has formally rejoined, but what that means remains to be seen.

Right now, the Republican commitment to destroying the planet in the interest of short-term profit for their prime constituency of extreme wealth seems unassailable. But it was not always so. As we've [discussed before](#), in 2008, there were signs of a deviation towards minimal concern for the fate of humanity, but it didn't last long. A juggernaut by the huge Koch Brothers energy conglomerate quickly returned the Party to obedience, since unchanged.

In defense of the stand of what was once a genuine political party, we should take note of the fact that the U.S. very rarely accepts international conventions, and

when it does so, it is with reservations that render them inapplicable to the U.S. That's even true of the Genocide Convention.

One may plausibly argue, however, that these fine distinctions are all irrelevant. Even when the U.S. fully accepts international treaties, it violates them at will, hence also violating the U.S. Constitution, which declares them to be the Supreme Law of the Land, binding on the political leadership. The clearest case is the UN Charter, the basis for modern international law. It bans "the threat or use of force" in international affairs, with reservations irrelevant to the constant violation of the Treaty (and the Constitution) by U.S. presidents.

So normal that it virtually never elicits a comment.

Discourse on international affairs has found a way around these inconvenient facts by devising the concept of a "rule-based international order," as contrasted with the old-fashioned "UN-based international order." The former is preferred, since the U.S. can set the rules and determine how and when they can be enforced — an interesting topic, but not for now.

A treaty on climate change, if it can be reached, is in a different category. Survival is at stake. The basic facts are brutally clear, more so with each passing year. They are laid out clearly enough in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, released on August 9. In brief, any hope of avoiding disaster requires taking significant steps right away to reduce fossil fuel use, continuing annually with the goal of effectively phasing out fossil fuel use by mid-century. We are approaching a precipice. A few steps more, and we fall over it, forever.

Falling off the precipice does not imply that everyone will die soon; there's a long way down. Rather, it means that irreversible tipping points will be reached, and barring some now-unforeseen technological miracle, the human species will be entering a new era: one of inexorable decline, with mounting horrors of the kind we can easily depict, extrapolating realistically from what already surrounds us — an optimistic estimate, since non-linear processes may begin to take off and dangers lurk that are only dimly perceived.

It will be an era of "*sauve qui peut*" — run for your lives, everyone for themselves, material catastrophe heightened by social collapse and wholesale psychic trauma

of a kind never before experienced. And on the side, an assault on nature of indescribable proportions.

All of this is understood at a very high level of confidence. Even a relic of rationality tells us that it is ridiculous to take a chance on its being mistaken, considering the stakes.

We might tarry for a moment on the date of the release of the IPCC report: August 9. Whether by accident or design, the choice is a momentous date in human affairs: the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Putting aside the horrors and the dubious efforts at justification, the Hiroshima bombing a few days earlier demonstrated that human intelligence would soon reach the level of being able to destroy everything. Nagasaki demonstrated that the commitment to attain this goal was deeply entrenched in the reigning sociopolitical system and intellectual culture. What remained open was whether human moral capacities, and the institutions humans had created, had the capacity to overcome what human intellect was on the verge of achieving: total cataclysm. After 75 frightening years, the question still remains open even as prospects shrink for a hopeful answer.

The crisis of environmental destruction — which extends well beyond the crime of global heating — raises quite similar questions.

The evidence at hand is not encouraging. Let's go back to August 9, 2021, with its clear warning that we must begin now to reduce fossil fuel use.

Immediately on receipt of this grim warning, the president of the most powerful state in world history issued an appeal to the global oil cartel OPEC to *increase* production. Europe followed suit, joined by the rest of what is called "advanced society." The reason is an energy crunch. That's doubtless a problem. One way to deal with it is to race towards the precipice. Another is for the rich in the rich societies, the major culprits, to tighten their belts while we sharply accelerate transition to sustainable energy.

The choice is unfolding before our eyes.

Petroleum industry journals are euphoric, announcing promising new discoveries that they can exploit to enhance production and reveling in the prospects for growing demand for their poisons. A few examples fill in details.

Germany is reacting to the August warning by joining in the call for increasing fossil fuel use and making its own contribution, for example, by [destroying villages](#) to expand coal mining.

Turning to the U.S., a mere [60 percent](#) of voters regard global warming as an urgent problem for government. It is only the most urgent problem that humans have ever faced.

The party breakdown is the usual one: Among Republicans, 45 percent of “liberal/moderate Republicans” see global warming as an urgent problem along with 17 percent of “conservative Republicans.” The persisting lethal denialism is not a great surprise in the light of pronouncements of the leadership and the media to which they are exposed.

Thanks to significant popular activism, Biden’s major program, now being torn to shreds in Congress, did include some useful steps on climate change. Nothing seems likely to survive. Republicans are 100 percent opposed. Democrats need unanimity to pass anything. The Senate chair of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources is a right-wing Democrat, also a coal baron and the leading recipient of fossil fuel funding in Congress: Joe Manchin. His position on climate concerns is simple: “[spending on innovation, not elimination](#).” Straight out of the fossil fuel industry playbook.

In South America, destruction of the Amazon is proceeding apace for the benefit of the domestic and international corporate sector, which has been hailing the policies of Chicago School Economics Minister Paulo Guedes: “privatize everything,” and who cares about the consequences. Recent scientific studies [have found](#) that “the southeastern Amazon was releasing more carbon than it was absorbing, even in rainy years when scientists had expected the forest to be in better health. It meant a part of the rainforest was no longer helping to slow climate change, but adding to the emissions driving it.”

That is a disaster for Brazil and indeed for the world, given the role of the huge tropical forests in regulating the global climate.

A [leaked report](#) of governmental efforts to weaken the IPCC study shows that the usual scoundrels are at work.

Saudi Arabia calls for eliminating such phrases as “the need for urgent and

accelerated mitigation actions at all scales” and “the focus of decarbonisation efforts in the energy systems sector needs to be on rapidly shifting to zero-carbon sources and actively phasing out fossil fuels.” It is joined by OPEC, along with fossil fuel producers Argentina and Norway.

Saudi officials elaborated further. Giving no details, one Saudi prince explained that a transition to net-zero carbon emissions is welcome, but it must be reached through a “carbon circular economy” — a plan built around initiatives such as recycling and carbon removal.

Just innovation, no elimination.

Saudi officials and the chief executive of Saudi oil giant Aramco, [the press reports](#), “expect demand for oil to continue and for it to be the dominant energy source for decades to come, and argue that reducing supply before demand drops risks a dangerous oil price spike, hurting economies such as Saudi Arabia’s that are dependent on oil and gas.”

Turning [elsewhere](#), “A senior Australian government official rejects the conclusion that closing coal-fired power plants is necessary” — a stand that is perhaps related to Australia’s position as the world’s leading coal exporter.

Continuing with the submissions to the IPCC, “Brazil and Argentina, two of the biggest producers of beef products and animal feed crops in the world, argue strongly against evidence in the draft report that reducing meat consumption is necessary to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Both countries call on the authors to delete or change some passages in the text referring to ‘plant-based diets’ playing a role in tackling climate change, or which describe beef as a ‘high carbon’ food.”

Again, not surprisingly, “A significant number of Switzerland’s comments are directed at amending parts of the report that argue developing countries will need support, particularly financial support, from rich countries in order to meet emission reduction targets.”

In brief, as we fall off the precipice, the near-uniform reaction is that: *I want to grasp my share of the loot as doomsday approaches.*

Returning to the still-open question posed by the August 9 anniversary, do human moral capacities, and the institutions humans have created, have the capacity to

overcome what human intellect and these institutions have shown themselves capable of achieving: total cataclysm?

The answer will soon be known.

And while reflecting on the unanswered question, we should never forget that human intellect has also forged feasible solutions to impending crises, easily at hand, though not for long.

Given our experience up to now with global climate talks, should we really have high expectations about the outcome of COP26? After all, in addition to everything you mentioned above, global oil demand is booming, China continues to build coal-fired power plants around the world, the U.S. is bent on maintaining its hegemonic status in the world system, and we not only have a divided world but a world where now the majority of citizens say that their country's society is more divided than ever before. Indeed, what can we realistically expect from COP26?

Chomsky: The business press is generally fairly realistic. Its audience has a stake in knowing what's happening in the world. So, to answer the question, it is useful to open today's (October 24) business press and read the first paragraph of the [major article](#) on what we can realistically expect: "As the prospects for strong government action to curb climate change grow less certain, energy shares, and especially coal mining stocks, are generating astonishing returns." The article goes on to review the great opportunities for huge short-term profits for the super-rich while they destroy the diminishing hopes for a livable world for their children.

Economists soberly explain that this is a "market failure" caused by "externalities" — uncounted costs. Not false. The article quotes a recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) study that found that that "market-based fossil fuel prices in 2020 failed to account for \$5.9 trillion in global environmental costs, equivalent to 6.8 percent of global gross domestic product. The I.M.F. estimated that the gap will rise to 7.4 percent of world G.D.P. by 2025."

Not false, but misleading. Market failures occur all the time, with increasing intensity since the heralded "market revolution" that has assaulted the world since Ronald Reagan opened the doors to wholesale robbery 40 years ago. But the anodyne phrase "market failure" does not begin to do justice to the monstrous

crime that state-backed capitalist institutions are perpetrating.

The business press gives little reason to be optimistic about the outcome of COP26, but it's worth remembering that it does not consider what humans can accomplish, if they choose. With regard to human effort and action, the outcome of COP26 doesn't matter all that much. If governments make pledges, they won't implement them without extensive popular activism. If they don't make pledges, they won't be driven to adopt and implement them without extensive popular activism. The message is much the same whatever the outcome: More work, lots more, on many fronts, not excluding the long-term dedication to dismantle lethal institutions and the doctrines that chain people to them.

Bob, the economics of global warming and global climate stabilization are quite straightforward. Indeed, a broad consensus has emerged about the economic impacts of global warming, although there is disagreement among economists about the best solutions to achieve significant reductions in carbon emissions. Why is it so difficult to implement viable climate policies even at the national, let alone the global, level?



Robert Pollin

Robert Pollin: Let's start with the most obvious obstacle to advancing viable climate policies, which is the implacable opposition of the fossil fuel companies. Here I refer to both the private companies, such as ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell as well as public corporations such as Saudi Aramco, Gazprom in Russia and Petrobras in Brazil. Let's assume we are working with the target set out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that we must stabilize the average global temperature at no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (1.5°C) above preindustrial levels. Within that framework, the most recent [careful research](#) by

Tyler Hansen shows that the extent of total fossil fuel assets owned by these corporations that are “unburnable” — i.e., cannot be burned to produce energy if the world has a chance of achieving the 1.5°C stabilization target — amounts to between \$13-\$15 trillion. Of this total, about 75 percent of these fossil fuel assets, between about \$10-\$11 trillion, are owned by the public corporations, with the remaining \$3-\$5 trillion owned by private corporations. We should not be surprised that the fossil fuel companies are fighting by all means available to them to continue profiting lavishly from selling this oil, coal and natural gas still in the ground. They don’t want to hear about dumping \$15 trillion in assets.

It’s true that the publicly owned national companies, controlling approximately 90 percent of the globe’s total fossil fuel reserves, do not operate with precisely the same profit imperatives as big private energy corporations. But let’s be clear that this does not mean that they are prepared to commit to fighting climate change simply because their stated mission is to serve the public as opposed to private shareholders, and because we, the public, face a global environmental emergency. Just as with the private companies, producing and selling fossil fuel energy generates huge revenue flows for these publicly owned companies. National development projects, lucrative careers and political power all depend on continuing the flow of large fossil fuel revenues.

Overall, then, there is no getting around that the interests of these fossil fuel companies will simply have to be defeated. Obviously, that will not be easy to accomplish. We are seeing this right now in the U.S., with Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia doing everything possible to kill even the minimally decent climate provisions of Biden’s Build Back Better program. Manchin himself started his own coal brokerage company in the state and continues to [receive large profits](#) from it. We are also seeing it on a global scale, with Russian President Vladimir Putin issuing [dire warnings](#) of upcoming energy shortages if investments to expand fossil fuel supply do not increase.

But it is also critical to recognize that the fossil fuel companies are not the only obstacle to advancing a viable global climate stabilization project. There is also the matter of pure inertia, which cannot be overlooked. We are faced with the challenge of building a new global energy infrastructure on the foundations of high efficiency and clean renewable energy, while also phasing out our existing fossil fuel-dominant energy infrastructure. This has to be a hugely challenging project, even under the best of circumstances and even putting aside

machinations of the fossil fuel companies. I have experienced this firsthand, for example, in our project at UMass-Amherst in which we built the first [zero-emissions office building](#) in western Massachusetts to house the Economics Department. There are lots of new ways of doing things that need to be learned, in terms of engineering, use of materials and workers developing new skills. It also requires people cooperating effectively.

There is also the absolutely critical question of “just transition” for workers and communities whose livelihoods are, at present, dependent on the fossil fuel industry. In my view, just transition has to be at the center of any global Green New Deal project. There is no denying that these workers and communities throughout the world will lose out in the clean energy transition. In order for the global clean energy project to succeed, it must provide adequate transitional support for these workers and communities. It is a matter of simple justice, but it is also a matter of strategic politics. Without such adjustment assistance programs operating at a major scale, the workers and communities facing retrenchment from the clean energy investment project will, predictably and understandably, fight to defend their communities and livelihoods. This in turn will create unacceptable delays in proceeding with effective climate stabilization policies.

My co-workers and I have estimated the costs of a very generous just transition program for all workers in the United States now tied to the fossil fuel and ancillary industries, working with the assumption that all fossil fuel production will have been shut down by 2050. This program would include a re-employment guarantee with wages at least matching the workers current pay, along with pension guarantees, and, as needed, retraining and relocation support. We [estimated](#) these total costs as averaging about \$3 billion per year. This would be equal to roughly 1/100 of one percent (0.01 percent) of average U.S. GDP between now and 2050. In other words, in terms of financing, it would be a trivial matter to establish this sort of just transition program throughout the U.S.

In fact, path-breaking developments are occurring right now in California toward advancing a just transition program in the state. This movement is being led by visionary labor leaders in the state, including leaders of the state’s oil refinery workers’ union. One such leader, Norman Rogers, a vice president of United Steelworkers Local 675, recently [wrote](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* that, *Though the energy transition is inevitable, a just version is not. Workers know*

what happens when whole industries go away: Companies maneuver behind our backs, squeeze every last drop of work out of a dying auto plant, steel mill or coal mine and shutter it overnight, devastating communities and stiffing workers out of jobs, pensions and healthcare. The fear is real of jobs lost with no plan for when operations begin to phase out.

Rogers emphasizes that “many speak of a ‘just transition,’ but we’ve never seen one. No worker or community member will ever believe that an equitable transition is possible until we see detailed, fully funded state [safety net](#) and job creation programs.” But he, optimistically, is arguing that, “With a fully funded equitable transition plan — meeting the immediate need for a safety net for workers and communities, and offering a bold vision to restructure our economy — we can jump-start recovery and move California’s workers, communities and the planet toward a more secure future.”

The enactment of a robust just transition program in California, led by the state’s labor unions, including its fossil fuel industry unions, will also provide a model for comparable measures to be adopted throughout the U.S. and globally. Supporting such initiatives should therefore be understood as an absolute first-tier priority for the U.S. and the global climate movement.

China has emerged as a global economic superpower in the last couple of decades and, in fact, since 2008 tops the annual list of being the largest emitter of greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, although we get a different picture if we look at carbon emissions per capita. Be that as it may, what sort of finance conditions need to be introduced in countries like China and in emerging economies for a successful transition to clean energy resources without sacrificing economic and social development?

Pollin: As of the most recent data, global carbon dioxide emissions were at about 34 billion tons. China is generating about 10 billion tons, 30 percent of this total, making it by far the country with the largest share of total emissions. The U.S. is next at about 5 billion tons, 15 percent of the total. The countries of the European Union (EU) account for another 9 percent. Thus, China, the U.S. and the EU are responsible for [54 percent](#) of all global emissions. They all need to drive their emissions down to zero no later than 2050 for there to be any chance of meeting the IPCC’s global emissions reduction targets of a 45 percent decline by 2030 and a net-zero global economy by 2050.

It's true that in terms of emissions per person, China's figure, at 7.4 tons per person, is still less than half the 15.2 tons per person figure for the United States. But it remains the case that China must go from its current total emissions level of 10 billion tons down to zero by 2050, just as the U.S. needs its emissions to fall absolutely, from 5 billion tons to zero.

It also follows that, even if China, the U.S. and the EU managed to push their carbon dioxide emissions down to zero tomorrow, we would still be only a bit more than halfway to achieving the global zero emissions goal, since the rest of the world is today responsible for about 46 percent of all emissions. It is therefore obvious that the transition to a global clean energy system has to be a global project. The transition has to be advancing in India, Vietnam, Australia, Kenya, Puerto Rico, Chile, South Korea, South Africa and Mexico just as much as in China, the U.S. and EU.

Building clean energy infrastructures in developing economies will not entail sacrificing economic and social development. Indeed, the Green New Deal remains focused on expanding good job opportunities, raising mass living standards and fighting poverty along with driving emissions to zero. All of these aims can be realistically accomplished, since investments in clean energy will be a major engine of job creation. Moreover, the costs of clean energy investments are already [lower](#), on average, than those for fossil fuels. Building a clean energy infrastructure will also support the expansion of a range of new public and private ownership forms. This includes small-scale community ownership in rural low-income communities, such as in sub-Saharan Africa. To date, roughly half of such communities still do not have access to electricity of any kind, despite generations of promises made by politicians of all stripes.

At the same time, we cannot expect low-income countries to finance their clean energy and just transition programs on their own. I have sketched out a global financing framework, in which there are four main components. Other approaches could also be viable. These four funding sources are: 1) a global carbon tax, in which 75 percent of revenues are rebated back to the public but 25 percent are channeled into clean energy investment projects; 2) transferring funds out of military budgets from all countries, but primarily the U.S.; 3) eliminating all existing fossil fuel subsidies and channeling 25 percent of the funds into clean energy investments; and 4) a Green Bond lending program, initiated by the U.S. Federal Reserve and European Central Bank, with other major central banks in

China, the U.K. and Japan also participating. Strong cases can be made for each of these funding measures. But each proposal does also have vulnerabilities, including around political feasibility. The most sensible approach is therefore to combine the measures into a single package that minimizes their respective weaknesses as standalone measures.

I work through some of the details of these proposals in our 2020 book, [Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal](#). But let's briefly consider the Green Bond financing proposal by way of illustration. This program will not take money out of anyone's pocket. It rather involves the world's major central banks effectively printing money as needed. This would be just as they did during both the 2007-09 global financial crisis and during the COVID recession, except on a far more modest scale than the largesse that the central banks [showered on Wall Street and global financial elite](#) to keep them afloat. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the U.S. Fed or European Central Bank should rely on this policy — what is technically known as “debt monetization” — on a routine basis. But we need to be equally clear that this is a fully legitimate option that the major central banks have in their toolkit, and that this option should indeed be brought into action under crisis conditions. Note here that the funds will be generated by the major central banks but then distributed globally on an equitable basis, to underwrite the clean energy investment projects at scale in all regions of the globe. Public investment banks in all regions, but especially in low-income countries, will then serve as primary conduits in moving specific investment projects forward.

What would you consider as the optimal outcome of the talks at the COP 26 summit?

Pollin: The optimal outcome would be for the summit to not produce another round of what Greta Thunberg has accurately described as the “blah, blah, blah” which has resulted from previous such gatherings. COP26 needs to establish truly binding commitments on all countries that would include the following:

1. Meeting at least the IPCC's emissions reduction targets, of a 45 percent global emissions cut by 2030 and to achieve zero emissions by 2050;
2. Mounting robust just transition programs in all countries and regions, to support workers and communities that will be negatively impacted by the emissions reduction project; and
3. Paying for these binding commitments through strongly egalitarian

financing measures.

Noam, the impact of human activities on the environment is so real and profound that past, present and future are interlinked in such way that there can be no blurring between the empirical and the normative. The climate crisis has created a global storm and cooperation and solidarity are essential prerequisites to the survival of the planet. However, given the daunting task that lays ahead (shrinking and ultimately eliminating emissions while advancing at the same time a framework of development that embraces both developed and developing countries and guaranteeing a socially just transition), how do we encourage activists and concerned citizens alike to remain committed to a struggle where the outcome is uncertain without succumbing to defeatism?

Chomsky: Outcomes have always been uncertain. Defeatism is not an option; it translates as “species suicide, bringing down much of life on Earth with it.”

There are steps forward. Crucially, there is widespread understanding of the measures that can be take, quite realistically, to avert impending disaster and move on to a much better world. That includes the comprehensive and detailed studies by our friend and colleague economist Robert Pollin, by economist Jeffrey Sachs, and by the International Energy Agency, all coming to generally similar conclusions. These results have also reached Congress in a 2019 resolution recently reintroduced by its sponsors, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey. It’s all there to be acted upon.

And while Sen. Joe Manchin is working assiduously to block any congressional action that departs from the “no elimination” death warrant issued by the energy corporations, his constituents in West Virginia are showing more concern for survival. A [recent report](#) of the United Mine Workers recognizes that, “Change is coming, whether we seek it or not. Too many inside and outside the coalfields have looked the other way when it comes to recognizing and addressing specifically what that change must be, but we can look away no longer.”

The union supports a transition to renewable energy, rightly insisting that workers receive good jobs — which should in fact be better jobs, as can be readily accomplished along lines that Bob Pollin has laid out in his studies and conveyed to the public in his grassroots work in West Virginia and other mining states, where unions are moving in the same direction.

There has also been considerable progress since COP21: sharp reduction in cost of sustainable energy, significant steps towards electrification and constant pressure to do more, mostly by the young, those who will have to endure the consequences of our folly and betrayal of their hopes. The recent global climate strike was a noteworthy example.

Another hopeful sign is the recovery of the labor movement from the state-corporate blows that were a salient feature of the neoliberal years from their outset, with deep roots in the origins of neoliberal doctrine in interwar Vienna. That's a long and important story, but there are many indications that it is underway, somewhat reminiscent of the early 1930s. The vibrant U.S. labor movement had been almost crushed by state-corporate violence. But as the Depression hit, it began to revive, and spearheaded the New Deal moves towards social democracy that greatly improved the lives of [many, though not all] Americans. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the business counteroffensive became powerful enough to restore a system of radical inequality and suppression of the basic rights of the great majority. Today, that assault is being challenged and may be overcome. One sign of many is the massive refusal to return to the rotten, dangerous, precarious jobs offered to the workforce during the neoliberal class war. The catastrophic "market failure" of environmental destruction is a catalyzing factor.

If that happens, we can hope for — and try to nurture — a revival of core features of labor activism from the early days of the industrial revolution, among them solidarity and internationalism. We're all in this together, not each alone trying to collect as many crumbs as we can for ourselves. That consciousness is essential for survival, at home and abroad.

In particular, there must be an end to provocative confrontations with China and a serious rethinking of the alleged "China threat" — experiences we've been through before with dire consequences, now literally a matter of survival. The U.S. and China will cooperate in approaching the urgent crises of today, or we're doomed.

The choices before us are stark. They cannot be evaded or ignored.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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Revolutionary Activism May Be Our Last Best Hope To Avert A Climate Catastrophe



CJ

Polychroniou

The challenge ahead is to turn every city and every town in virtually every major country in the world into a stronghold of the global climate movement.

With the United Nations climate-change summit (COP26) in Glasgow less than a few days away, the prospects of forging a global consensus on transformative mitigation strategies to the climate emergency don't look any more promising than they did in previously held rounds of international climate diplomacy.

From the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to COP25 held in Madrid in 2019, the project of advancing global action to tackle the climate crisis has failed rather miserably. In fact, much of the progress in the fight against global warming is driven by cities and local governments, thanks to grassroots activism. And it is actually the young activists that have captured the world's attention in the fight against climate crisis, which seems to suggest that our "last best hope" may be indeed with revolutionary activism. Most national governments have yet to make the fight against global warming a top priority. They are full of big talk, but very little action.

Take for instance the pledges—known as "nationally determined contributions"—at COP21 to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Most countries are [falling](#) way short of the goal of holding warming to 1.5 Celsius. Temperatures have already [risen](#) 1.2 Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and there is in fact very little chance that we can limit the Earth's warming to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius, which is a key aim of the international agreement.

Moreover, global oil demand is again on the increase, carbon dioxide emissions soared in 2021, and China continues to rely on coal in spite of [recent pledges](#) to stop building new coal-fired power plants abroad. As for the world's biggest economy, the United States is [way behind](#) Europe in the transition to a green economy. In fact, the US is the country that has done the most so far in blocking effective action to combat the climate crisis.

And let's not forget the destruction of the world's largest Amazon rainforest, a process which has greatly [intensified](#) under Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro in the name, he claims, of development.

Indeed, shouldn't the international community have an obligation to intervene in a foreign country in order to prevent irreversible environmental damage?

The failure of advancing global action against the most serious social, political, economic and environmental problem facing the human race and the planet stems from two interrelated facts: (a) the presence of an international economic system

(capitalism) which places profits over people and planet, and (b) the absence of effective mechanisms of international cooperation.

Let's face it. Capitalist "logic" is what's destroying the planet. While eliminating capitalism is hardly possible at the current historical juncture, taming the beast is hardly difficult and an absolute must in order to avert a complete climate breakdown. This can be done by bringing back the social state, doing away with the predatory and parasitic practices of financial capital, and charting a course of sustainable development through a global regulatory regime for the protection of the environment.

We can start with the following measures:

1. Eliminate all fossil fuel subsidies, which according to a recent IMF study [amounts](#) to \$5.9 trillion in 2020
2. Ban banks from funding new fossil fuel projects. Amazingly enough, there has been zero mention so far in international climate talks of a "moratorium" on new investments in the coal, oil, and gas industries. In fact, the words "fossil fuel" "coal" and "oil" were not even mentioned in the COP21 agreement, so it should come as no surprise that banks have [poured](#) close to \$4 trillion in the fossil fuel industries between 2016-2020.
3. [Make ecocide an international crime](#) similar to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. As we move towards a green economy, we must take all measures to ensure that we hold all entities—individuals, states, and corporations—accountable for causing "widespread, severe or long-lasting damage to the environment."
4. Demand the cancellation of debt for lower income countries, which now [spend several times](#) more on servicing debt than dealing with the challenges of global warming.

Of course, none of the above measures will materialize without international cooperation. However, the extent to which states will come to realize that advancing their national interests in the age of global warming may be detrimental to the greater good of the global society appears to depend not on the wisdom and goodwill of heads of states and elected politicians, but rather on the willingness of average citizens to challenge the existing political establishments

and the interests that they serve.

In this context, revolutionary activism on behalf of the planet may be indeed our “last best hope.” Thus, the challenge ahead is to turn every city and every town in virtually every major country in the world into a stronghold of the global climate movement. Then, and only then, can we realistically expect credible action to come from global climate summits.

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Source:

<https://www.commondreams.org/revolutionary-activism-may-be-our-last-best-hope-avert-climate-catastrophe>

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Chomsky, Pollin And Lapavitsas: Are We Witnessing The Demise Of Neoliberalism?



Noam Chomsky

After 40 years of neoliberal rule, in which the state actively sought to eradicate the boundary between market, civil society and governance by making economic rationality the cornerstone of every human activity, advanced capitalism appears to be at a crossroads on account of the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. So-called “big government” has staged a dramatic comeback, and even conservative leaders have broken with some of the basic orthodoxies of neoliberalism.

Are we in the midst of fundamental and permanent changes with regard to the relation between the state and markets? Are we witnessing the demise of neoliberalism? Has the pandemic led to the emergence of a new variant of capitalism?

In this interview, world-renowned scholar and public intellectual Noam Chomsky, along with two preeminent economists of the left — Costas Lapavistas from the University of London and Robert Pollin from the University of Massachusetts Amherst — share their thoughts and insights about economics and capitalism in the age of the pandemic and beyond.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the neoliberal era of the last 40 years has been defined to a large extent by growing inequalities, slow growth and environmental degradation. Indeed, even the International Monetary Fund admitted some years ago that [neoliberalism had failed](#). Yet, it took the outbreak of a pandemic for a consensus to emerge regarding the failures of neoliberalism. Why did neoliberalism triumph and endure in the first place, and is it actually dead?

Noam Chomsky: My feeling is that a version of neoliberalism has triumphed because it has been highly successful — for the designers, whose power has been considerably enhanced by such predictable consequences as radical inequality,

restricting democracy, destruction of unions and atomization of the population so that there is limited defense against the version of neoliberalism that has been pursued with impressive dedication in this latest phase of class war. I say a “version” because the state-corporate managers of the system insist upon a very powerful state that can protect their interests internationally and provide them with massive bailouts and subsidies when their programs collapse, as they do regularly.

For similar reasons, I don’t think that this version is dead, though it is being re-adjusted in response to growing popular anger and resentment, much fueled by the successes of the neoliberal assault on the population.

Bob, the pandemic has shown us that neoliberal capitalism is more than inadequate in addressing large-scale economic and public health crises. Are the resources mobilized by national states during the pandemic crisis a simple case of emergency Keynesianism, or do they represent a fundamental shift in the traditional role of government, which is to maximize society’s welfare? Moreover, are the policies we have seen implemented so far at all levels of government sufficient to provide the basis for a progressive economic agenda in the post-pandemic era?



Robert Pollin

Robert Pollin: Neoliberalism is a variant of capitalism in which economic policies are weighted heavily in favor of supporting the privileges of big corporations, Wall Street and the rich. Neoliberalism became dominant globally around 1980, beginning with the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. The top priorities under neoliberalism, as practiced throughout the world, have included: cutting both taxes on the rich along with

public spending on the non-rich; weakening protections for both working people and the environment and any semblance of a commitment to full and decent employment; and enabling financial speculation to run rampant while bailing out the speculators when the markets proceed, inevitably, into crises.

Neoliberalism represented a counterrevolution against social democratic/New Deal/developmental state variants capitalism, which emerged primarily as a result of successful political struggles by progressive political parties, labor unions and allied social movements, out of the 1930s Depression and continuing through the early 1970s. Of course, social democratic/New Deal/developmental state capitalism was still capitalism. Disparities of income, wealth and opportunity remained intolerably high, along with the malignancies of racism, sexism and imperialism. Nevertheless, the broadly social democratic models produced dramatically more egalitarian versions of capitalism than the neoliberal regime that supplanted these models. The neoliberal model, in turn, has been highly successful in achieving its most basic aim, which is to shower ever-greater advantages on the already over-privileged. For example, under neoliberalism in the United States between 1978 and 2019, the average pay for big corporate CEOs has risen [tenfold](#) relative to the average non-supervisory worker.

With the onset of the COVID pandemic in March 2020, government policies in the high-income countries did pursue measures to prevent a total, 1930s-level economic collapse. Depending on the country, these measures included direct cash support for lower- and middle-income people, significant increases in unemployment insurance and large payroll subsidy programs to prevent layoffs. But by far, the most aggressive policy interventions were the bailouts provided for big corporations and Wall Street.

In the U.S., for example, nearly 50 percent of the entire labor force filed for unemployment benefits between March 2020 and February 2021. However, over this same period, Wall Street stock prices rose by 46 percent, one of the sharpest one-year increases on record. The same pattern prevailed globally. The International Labour Organization [reported](#) that, “There were unprecedented global employment losses in 2020 of 114 million jobs relative to 2019.” At the same time, global stock markets rose sharply — by 45 percent throughout Europe, 56 percent in China, 58 percent in the U.K., and 80 percent in Japan, and with Standard & Poor’s Global 1200 index [rising](#) by 67 percent.

So while there was a desperately needed expansion of social welfare programs helping people to survive under COVID, these measures were enacted within the framework of still larger efforts to prop up the still prevailing neoliberal order.

Of course, the severity of the climate crisis has continued to deepen during the pandemic. In February, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [said](#), “2021 is a make-or-break year to confront the global climate emergency.... Governments are nowhere close to the level of ambition needed to limit climate change to 1.5 degrees and meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. The major emitters must step up with much more ambitious emissions reductions targets for 2030 ... well before the November UN Climate Conference in Glasgow.”

We are now into October in the “make or break year” and yet, little has been accomplished since Guterres spoke in February. It is true that, throughout the high-income countries, social movements and climate activists are fighting to advance programs that combine climate stabilization and an egalitarian social agenda, under the rubric of a global Green New Deal. The extent to which they succeed will determine whether we will have established a basis for a progressive economic agenda and effective climate policies in the post-pandemic era. We do not yet know how successful these efforts will be. As [we discussed](#) at some length recently, the social infrastructure and climate proposal being debated right now in the U.S. Congress is itself not ambitious enough to be truly transformative. But if it is enacted, it will still represent a significant break from neoliberal dominance that has prevailed since Thatcher and Reagan.

Costas, the COVID pandemic has exposed numerous structural flaws of capitalism, and the neoliberal order may be indeed on the verge of collapse. Still, can we speak of a “crisis of capitalism” given that we do not see large-scale opposition to the current system?

Costas Lapavistas: There is no question that the pandemic shock represents a tremendous crisis of global capitalism, but I would urge strong caution regarding the collapse of neoliberalism. The period since the Great Crisis of 2007-2009 looks more like an interregnum (a term offered in the spirit of Antonio Gramsci) when the old is refusing to die and the new cannot be born. And like all such periods, it is prone to monsters, including fascism.



*Costas Lapavistas -
Photo: SOAS University
of London*

The Great Crisis of 2007-2009 was overcome by the state deploying its massive strength to defend financialized capitalism and globalization. But what followed was a decade of low growth, poor investment, weak productivity growth, sustained inequality and partially revived profits. Economic performance was poor in core countries, providing further evidence of the failure of neoliberalism. The Golden Era of financialization is well and truly over, despite the sustained rise of stock markets in the previous decade. Yet, economic performance was also mediocre in China, reflecting an underlying weakness of productive accumulation across the world.

When COVID-19 struck, it became crystal clear that contemporary capitalism is entirely dependent on massive state intervention. Core Western states were able to intervene on an unprecedented scale mostly because of monopoly command by central banks over fiat money. Unlike 2007-2009, however, the state also deployed fiat money to relax austerity, thus engaging in the unspoken nationalization of the wage bill and the income statements of thousands of enterprises.

It is a misunderstanding that neoliberalism necessarily means marginalizing the state and imposing austerity. Rather, it is about using the state selectively to defend the interests of a small elite, an oligarchy, associated with big business and the financial sector. Fundamentally, it stands for shifting the balance of power in favor of capital by removing controls on its activities. When the pandemic shock threatened the foundations of class rule, austerity and forbearing from direct economic intervention were abandoned in the blink of an eye. The

neoliberal ideologists rapidly adapted to the new reality, though it is always possible that austerity will return. What has not taken place is an institutional shift in favor of workers' interests that would limit the freedom of capital. It is primarily in this sense that the old is refusing to die.

The pandemic also made it clear that there is great variety in the relationship between powerful states and domestic capitalist accumulation. Core Western states, in the grip of neoliberal ideology, derive their strength primarily from command over fiat money. In contrast, the Chinese state remains directly involved in both productive accumulation and finance as well as having possession over vast resources. Their respective responses to the pandemic differed greatly.

Inevitably there has been a tremendous escalation in the contest for global hegemony, including in the military field. For the first time since 1914, moreover, the hegemonic contest is also immediately economic. The Soviet Union was exclusively a political and military contestant to the U.S. — the Lada could never compete with Chrysler. But China can outcompete the U.S. economically, making the struggle considerably deeper and removing any obvious point of equilibrium. The U.S. ruling bloc realizes that it has made a strategic miscalculation, and this accounts for its current unrelenting aggressiveness. Conditions in the international arena are exceedingly dangerous.

Still, the global hegemonic struggle lacks entirely in ideological content. Western neoliberal democracies are exhausted, failed and bereft of new ideas. The attempts of the U.S. ruling bloc to present its aggressiveness as a defense of democracy are hollow and ludicrous. On the other hand, Chinese (and Russian) authoritarianism has considerable domestic support but no capacity to offer a globally appealing social and political perspective.

The characteristic feature of the interregnum since 2007-2009 is an ideological impasse. There is tremendous discontent with capitalism, particularly as the degradation of the environment and the warming of the planet have raised great concern among the young. But that concern has not translated into a broad-based mobilization behind fresh socialist ideas and politics. This is the challenge ahead, particularly as the far right is already taking advantage.

Postcapitalism (defined broadly as a social system in which the power of markets is restricted, productive activity is premised on automation, work is delinked from

wages, and the state provides universal basic services and a basic income) is possible because of changes in information technology, according to some pundits. Should the left spend political capital by envisioning a postcapitalist future?

Lapavistas: During the pandemic crisis, the domestic actions of nation states displaced the precepts and prescriptions of neoliberal capitalism, foisted invasive measures on social and personal life centering on public health and hygiene, and imposed severe restrictions on civil liberties and economic activity. The state inflamed political tensions, heightened social polarization and restricted freedoms.

Workers paid the greatest price through income loss, rising unemployment and worsening public provision. But the middle strata were also left out in the cold, thus delivering a major blow to the class alliances that supported the neoliberal project. Giant oligopolies in new technology emerged as the main beneficiaries — Google, Amazon, Microsoft and the rest. Their actions are steadily eclipsing the figure of the citizen as personal identities are increasingly organized around market links to the oligopolies. At the same time, the extreme right was strengthened, a trend that started before the pandemic and has accelerated through the agency of powerful oligarchies.

There has been no shortage of grassroots reactions to these developments. Heavy-handed state actions, official cultivation of fear, suspension of rights and liberties, the danger of permanent repression, and the crushing of workers and the middle strata during the lockdowns spurred various responses often in a libertarian direction.

Bear in mind that maintaining capitalist accumulation in the years to come will be exceedingly difficult across the world. The underlying weakness of accumulation is far from easy to confront. It is also clear that state intervention in the pandemic has created major difficulties with the disruption of supply chains, the rise of inflation eating into workers' incomes and the tremendous escalation of public debt. And all that is without even mentioning the broader issues of environment and climate.

It is hardly possible that economic growth could be sustained without large-scale state intervention on the supply side through public investment that also involves

profound distributional changes in income that benefit workers. It seems even less likely that this would happen without a major shift in property rights, redistributing wealth and productive resources in favor of workers and the poor.

Technology alone is never the answer for complex social problems. Indeed, one aspect of the technological revolution of the last four decades is its inability even to improve the economic conditions of accumulation since its effect on the average productivity of labor is modest. I see no reason at this stage to expect that artificial intelligence would prove dramatically different. Perhaps it will, but there are no guarantees.

Western neoliberal democracies are ideologically exhausted, and their capitalist economies are beset with problems. In this context, it is imperative for socialists and progressives to think of a postcapitalist future and ascertain its broad parameters. We need to think about the use of digital technologies, the greening of production and the protection of the environment. But all that should take place in social conditions that favor working people and not capitalists, with a new sociality, collective action and individual fulfilment through communal association. The rejuvenation of the socialist promise is the paramount need of the times.

Bob, during the neoliberal era, mainstream economics shaded easily into ideology. Indeed, it is rather easy to show that mainstream economic policy is full of misrepresentation of reality. The question is: How does an alleged science become ideology? And how likely it is that the coronavirus pandemic, in conjunction with the flaws of neoliberalism and the urgency of the climate crisis, will lead to an intellectual paradigm shift in "[dismal science](#)"?

Pollin: Let's recognize that all varieties of economists are heavily influenced by ideology, or what the great conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter more judiciously termed their "pre-analytic vision." Leftist economists, myself included, are as guilty as anyone else. Our ideology influences the questions that we decide are most important to ask. Ideology also provides us with some initial guesses as to what the answers to these questions are likely to be. Still, if we are also attempting to be the least bit scientific, or even minimally honest, as economic researchers, we will put our hunches and our preferred answers to the test of evidence and be open to challenges.

I think it is fair to say that, not all, but a high percentage of mainstream economists have not been committed to these minimally objective scientific standards. They rather have been so fully immersed in their ideological biases that they are unable to even think about how they might ask questions differently. Their biases have been reinforced by the fact that these prejudices provide succor to policy regimes that, as noted above, shower benefits on the already overprivileged.

Joan Robinson, the renowned Cambridge University economist of the Great Depression and post-World War II era, [beautifully captured](#) this allure of orthodox economics as follows: “One of the main effects (I will not say purposes) of orthodox traditional economics was ... a plan for explaining to the privileged class that their position was morally right and was necessary for the welfare of society.”

At the same time, there has been no shortage of progressive economists over the neoliberal era who have stood up to mainstream orthodoxy, as represented, for example, by the 24 people you interviewed in the new book, [Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists](#). In my view, how much influence economists such as these will have will depend primarily on how successful are the progressive movements in advancing the Green New Deal and related programs in the coming months and years.

There are hopeful signs. Just late last month, the Federal Reserve released [a paper](#) by Jeremy Rudd, a senior member of its own staff, which begins with the observation that “mainstream economics is replete with ideas that ‘everyone knows’ to be true, but that are actually arrant nonsense.”

Rudd also notes on page one that he is leaving aside in this paper “the deeper concern that the primary role of mainstream economics in our society is to provide apologetics for a criminally oppressive, unsustainable, and unjust social order.” There may well be more Jeremy Rudds out there, poised to spring from the shadows of the professional mainstream. This would be a most positive development. But I would also say that it’s about time.

Noam, it’s been said by far too many that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Given that capitalism is actually destroying the Earth, how, firstly, would you respond to the above statement, and, secondly, how

do you envision economy and society after capitalism?

Chomsky: I'd prefer to rephrase the question to refer to state capitalism. Those whom Adam Smith called "the masters of mankind," the dominant business classes, would never tolerate capitalism, which would expose them to the ravages of the market. That's for the victims. For the masters, a powerful state is required — insofar as they can control it and reduce the "underlying population" (Thorstein Veblen's ironic term) to subordination and passivity.

It does not seem to me too difficult to imagine at least a serious mitigation of the destructive and repressive elements of this system, and its eventual transformation to a far more fair and just society. In fact, we must not only imagine but proceed to implement such programs, or we'll all be finished — the masters too.

It's even quite realistic to imagine — and implement — the overthrow of the basic state capitalist principle: renting oneself to a master (in a more anodyne formulation, having a job). After all, for millennia it's been recognized — in principle at least — that being subjected to the will of a master is an intolerable attack on human dignity and rights. The concept is not far back in our own history. In late 19th-century America, radical farmers and industrial workers were seeking to create a "cooperative commonwealth" in which they would be free of domination by illegitimate bosses robbing their labor and of northeast bankers and market managers. These powerful movements were so effectively crushed by state-corporate force that today even the highly popular ideas sound exotic. But they are not far below the surface and are even being revived in many important ways.

In short, there's reason to be hopeful that what must be done can be done.

Note: This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and concision.

Source:

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Chomsky: It's Life And Death - Intellectuals Can't Keep Serving The Status Quo



Noam Chomsky

The overwhelming majority of intellectuals have historically been servants of the

status quo.

That was the case more than half a century ago, when Noam Chomsky pointed out as much in his classic essay "[The Responsibility of Intellectuals](#)," and it continues to be the case today, when oppositional public intellectuals continue to be a small minority.

Indeed, if anything, the number of critical/oppositional public intellectuals — in other words, thinkers who are versed to speak on a wide range of issues from an anti-establishment standpoint — has been in decline in recent decades, even as the public sphere has grown bigger and louder due to the dramatic expansion of the internet and social media. One factor in this trend may be universities' overwhelming emphasis on narrow, specialized and even arcane knowledge, and a resistance within academic culture to prioritizing making an impact on the public arena by addressing issues that affect directly people's lives and challenge the status quo. Another factor may be the rising tide of anti-intellectualism in the U.S. and beyond.

Yet, in a highly fragile world facing existential threats, we need the voice of critical intellectuals more than any other time in history. In the interview that follows, Noam Chomsky — the scholar, public thinker and activist who has been described as a "world treasure" and "[arguably the most important intellectual alive](#)" — discusses the urgent need for more intellectuals not to "speak truth to power" but to speak *with* the powerless.

C.J. Polychroniou: Long ago, in your celebrated essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," you argued that intellectuals must insist on truth and expose lies, but must also analyze events in their historical perspective. Now, while you never implied that this is the only responsibility that intellectuals have, don't you think that the role of intellectuals has changed dramatically over the course of the last half century or so? I mean, true, critical/oppositional intellectuals were always few and far between in the modern Western era, but there were always giants in our midst whose voice and status were not only revered by a fair chunk of the citizenry, but, in some cases, produced fear and even awe among the members of the ruling class. Today, we have mainly functional/conformist "intellectuals" who focus on narrow, highly specialized and technical areas, and do not dare to challenge the status quo or speak out against social evils out of fear of losing their job, being denied tenure and promotion, or not having access to grants. Indeed,

whatever happened to public intellectuals like Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, and to iconic artists like Picasso with his fight against fascism?

Noam Chomsky: Well, what did happen to Bertrand Russell?

Russell was jailed during World War I along with the handful of others who dared to oppose that glorious enterprise: Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Eugene Debs — who was even excluded from postwar amnesty by the vengeful Woodrow Wilson — to mention only the most famous. Some were treated more kindly, like Randolph Bourne, merely ostracized and barred from liberal intellectual circles and journals. Russell's later career had many ugly episodes, including his being declared by the courts to be too free-thinking to be allowed to teach at City College, a flood of vilification from high places because of his opposition to the Vietnam War, scurrilous treatment even after his death.

Not all that unusual for those who break ranks, no matter how distinguished their contributions, as Russell's surely were.

The term "intellectual" itself is a strange one. It is not applied to a Nobel laureate who devotes his life to physics, or to the janitor in his building who may have little formal education but deep insight and perceptive understanding of human affairs, history, culture. The term is used, usually, to refer to a category of people with a degree of privilege who are somehow regarded to be the guardians of society's intellectual and moral values. They are supposed to uphold and articulate those values and call upon others to adhere to them.

Within this category there is a small minority who challenge power, authority and received doctrine. It is sometimes held that their responsibility is "to speak truth to power." I've always found that troubling. The powerful typically know the truth quite well. They generally know what they are doing, and don't need our instructions. They also will not benefit from moral lessons, not because they are necessarily bad people, but because they play a certain institutional role, and if they abandon that role, somebody else will fill it as long as the institutions persist. There is no point instructing CEOs of the fossil fuel industry that their activities are damaging communities and destroying the environment and our climate. They've known that for a long time. They also know that if they depart from dedication to profit and concern themselves with the human impact of what they are doing, they'll be out on the streets and someone will replace them to carry out

the institutionally required tasks.

There remains a range of options, but it is narrow.

It would make a lot more sense to speak truth not to power, but to its victims. If you speak truth to the powerless, it's possible that it could benefit somebody. It might help people confront the problems in their lives more realistically. It might even help them to act and organize in such ways as to compel the powerful to modify institutions and practices; and, even more significantly, to challenge illegitimate structures of authority and the institutions on which they are realized and thereby expand the scope of freedom and justice. It won't happen in any other way, and it's often happened in that way in the past.

But I don't think that's right either. The task of a responsible person — anyone who wants to uphold intellectual and moral values — is not to speak what they regard as truth *to* anybody — the powerful or the powerless — but rather to speak *with* the powerless and to try to learn the truth. That's always a collective endeavor and wisdom and understanding need not come from any particular turf.

But that's quite rare in the history of intellectuals.

Let's recall that the term "intellectual" came into use in its modern sense with the [Dreyfus trial](#) in France in the late 19th century. Today we admire and respect those who stood up for justice in their defense of Dreyfus, but if you look back at that time, they were a persecuted minority. The "immortals" of the French Academy bitterly condemned these preposterous writers and artists for daring to challenge the august leaders and institutions of the French State. The prominent figure of the Dreyfusards, Emile Zola, had to flee from France.

That's pretty typical. Take almost any society you like and you will find that there is a fringe of critical dissidents and that they are usually subjected to one or another form of punishment. Those I mentioned are no exception. In recent history, in Russian-run Eastern Europe, they could be jailed; if it was in our own domains, in Central or South America, they could be tortured and murdered. In both cases, there was harsh repression of people who are critical of established power.

That goes back as far as you like, all the way back to classical Greece. Who was the person who [drank the hemlock](#)? It was the person who was "corrupting" the

youth of Athens by asking searching questions that are better hidden away. Take a look at the Biblical record, roughly about the same period. It's kind of oral history, but in what's reconstructed from it, there were people who by our standards might be called intellectuals — people who condemned the king and his crimes, called for mercy for widows and orphans, other subversive acts. How were they treated? They were imprisoned, driven into the desert, reviled. There were intellectuals who were respected, flatterers at the Court. Centuries later, they were called False Prophets, but not at the time. And if you think through history, that pattern is replicated quite consistently.

The basic operative principle was captured incisively by McGeorge Bundy, a leading liberal intellectual, noted scholar, former Harvard dean, national security adviser under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, then director of the Ford Foundation. In 1968, when protest against the Vietnam War was peaking, Bundy published an article in the main establishment journal *Foreign Affairs* in which he discussed protest against the war. Much of the protest was legitimate, he conceded: there had in retrospect been some mistakes in managing such a complex effort. But then there was a fringe of “wild men in the wings” who merit only contempt. The wild men actually descended so far as to look into motives. That is, they treated the U.S. political leadership by the standards applied to others, and hence must be excluded from polite company.

Bundy's analysis was in fact the norm among liberal intellectuals. Their publications soberly distinguished the “technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals” from the “value-oriented intellectuals.” The former are the good guys, who orchestrate and inform policy, and are duly honored for their constructive work — the Henry Kissingers, the kind who loyally transmit orders from their half-drunk boss for a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia, “anything that flies against anything that moves.” A call for genocide that's not easy to duplicate in the archival record. The latter are the wild men in the wings who prate about moral value, justice, international law and other sentimentalities.

The U.S. isn't El Salvador. The wild men don't have their brains blown out by elite battalions armed and trained in Washington, like the six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, who [suffered this fate](#) along with their housekeeper and her daughter on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Who even knows their names? Properly, one might argue, since there were many other religious martyrs among the hundreds of thousands slaughtered in Washington's crusade in Central

America in the 1980s, managed with the assistance of technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals.

It is, regrettably, all too easy to continue.

I believe it would be of great interest if you talked about the historical context of "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," but also if you elaborate on what you mean when you say intellectuals must see events from their historical perspective.

The essay was based on a talk given in 1966 to a student group at Harvard. It was published in the group's journal. They've probably expunged it since. It was the Harvard Hillel Society. The journal is *Mosaic*. This was a year before Israel's military victory in 1967, a great gift to the U.S., which led to a sharp re-orientation in U.S.-Israeli policies and major shifts in popular culture and attitudes in the U.S. — an interesting and important story, but not for here.

The *New York Review of Books* published an edited version.

Since the talk was at Harvard, it was particularly important to focus on intellectual elites and their special links to government. The Harvard faculty was quite prominent in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. [Camelot](#) mythology is in considerable part their creation. But as we've been discussing, it's just one phase in a long history of intellectual service to power. It's still unfolding without fundamental change, though the activism of the '60s and its aftermath has substantially changed much of the country, widening the wings in which "wild men" can pursue their value-oriented subversion.

This impact has also greatly broadened the historical perspective from which events of the world are perceived. No one today would write a major diplomatic history of the U.S. recounting how after the British yoke was overthrown, the former colonists, in the words of Thomas Bailey, "concentrated on the task of felling trees and Indians and of rounding out their natural boundaries" — in "self-defense," of course. Few in the '60s fully grasped the fact that our "forever wars" began in 1783. The horrendous 400-year record of torture of African Americans was also scarcely acknowledged by mainstream academics; more, and worse, is constantly being unearthed. The same is true in other areas. Dedicated and conscientious activism can open many windows for valuable historical perspective to be gained.

The world has changed a great deal since the era of the Vietnam War, and I think you would agree with me that we are facing greater challenges today than ever before. Moreover, we live in a much smaller world, and some of the challenges facing us are truly global in nature and scope. In that context, what should be the role of intellectuals and of social movements in a globalized world and with a shared future for humanity?

You're quite right that we face far greater challenges today than during the Vietnam era. In 1968, when liberal intellectuals were excoriating the value-oriented "wild men," the leading issue was that "Viet-Nam as a cultural and historic entity [was] threatened with extinction [as] the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size," the judgment of the most respected Vietnam specialist, military historian Bernard Fall.

It is now organized human society worldwide that is "threatened with extinction" under the blows of environmental destruction, overwhelmingly by the rich, concentrated in the rich countries. That's apart from the no less ominous and growing threat of nuclear holocaust, being stoked as we speak.

We are living in an era of confluence of crises that has no counterpart in human history. For each of these, feasible solutions are known, though time is short. There is no need to waste words on responsibility.

Who is undertaking the historic task of addressing these crises? Who carried out the Global Climate Strike on September 24, a desperate attempt to wake up the dithering leaders of global society, and citizens who have been lulled into passivity by elite treachery? We know the answer: the young, the inheritors of our folly. It should be deeply painful to witness the scene at Davos, the annual gathering where the rich and powerful posture in their self-righteousness, and applaud politely when Greta Thunberg instructs them quietly and expertly on the catastrophe they have been blithely creating.

Nice little girl. Now go back to school where you belong and leave the serious problems to us, the enlightened political leaders, the soulful corporations working day and night for the common good, the responsible intellectuals. We'll take care of it, ensuring that the betrayal will be apocalyptic — as it will be, if we grant them the power to run the world in accord with the principles they have

established and implemented.

The principles are not obscure. Right now, governments of the world, the U.S. foremost among them, are pressuring oil producers to increase production — having just been advised in the August IPCC report, by far the direst yet, that catastrophe is looming unless we begin right now to reduce fossil fuel use year by year, effectively phasing them out by mid-century. Petroleum industry journals are euphoric about the discovery of new fields to exploit as demand for oil increases. The business press debates whether the U.S. fracking industry or OPEC is best placed to increase production.

Congress is debating a bill that might have slightly slowed the race to destruction. The denialist party is 100 percent opposed, so the fate of legislation is in the hands of the “moderate” Democrats, particularly Joe Manchin. He has made his position on climate explicit: “[Spending on innovation, not elimination.](#)” Straight out of the playbook of PR departments of the fossil fuel companies, no surprise from Congress’s leading recipient of fossil fuel compensation. Fossil fuel use must continue unimpeded, driving us to catastrophe in the interests of short-term profit for the very rich. Period.

On the rest of the Biden package, Manchin — the swing vote — has made it clear that he will accept only a trickle, also insisting on cumbersome and degrading means testing for what is standard practice in the civilized world. The posture is certainly not for the benefit of his constituents. As for other “moderates,” it is much the same. Without far more intense public pressure, there was never much hope that this Congress would allow the country to begin to beat back the cruel assault of overwhelming business power.

There is no need to tarry on what this entails about responsibility.

And again, we dare not neglect the cloud that was cast over the world by human intelligence 75 years ago and has been darkening in recent years. The arms control regime that had been laboriously constructed over many decades has been systematically dismantled by the last two Republican administrations, first Bush II and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, then Trump wielding his wrecking ball with abandon. He left office barely in time for Biden to salvage the New START Treaty, accepting Russia’s pleas to extend it. Biden continues, however, to support the bloated military budget, to pursue the race to develop more

dangerous weapons, and to carry out highly provocative acts where diplomacy and negotiations are surely possible.

A major point of contention right now is “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. More accurately, as Australian strategic analyst Clinton Fernandes [points out](#), the conflict concerns military/intelligence operations in China’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending 200 miles offshore. The U.S. holds that such operations are permissible in all EEZs. China holds that they are not. India agrees with China’s interpretation, and vigorously protested [recent U.S. military operations](#) in its EEZ.

EEZs were established by the 1982 Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The U.S. is the only maritime power not to have ratified the Law, but asserts that it will not violate it. The relevant wording about military operations in the Law is not entirely precise. Surely this is a clear case where diplomacy is in order, not highly provocative actions in a region of considerable tension, with the threat of escalation, possibly without bounds.

All of this is part of the U.S. effort to “contain China.” Or, to put it differently, [to establish](#) “The fact that somehow, the rise of 20 per cent of humanity from abject poverty into something approaching a modern state, is illegitimate — but more than that, by its mere presence, an affront to the United States. It is not that China presents a threat to the United States — something China has never articulated nor delivered — rather, its mere presence represents a challenge to United States pre-eminence.”

This is the quite realistic assessment of former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, reacting to the recent AUKUS (Australia-U.K.-U.S.) agreement to sell eight advanced nuclear submarines to Australia, to be incorporated in the U.S. naval command in order to respond to the “threat of China.”

The agreement abrogates a France-Australia agreement for sale of conventional subs. With typical imperial arrogance, Washington did not even notify France, instructing the European Union on its place in the U.S.-run global order. In reaction, France recalled its ambassadors to the U.S. and Australia, ignoring the U.K., a mere vassal state.

Australian military correspondent Brian Toohey [observes](#) that Australia’s submission to the U.S. does not enhance its security — quite the contrary — and

that AUKUS has no discernable strategic purpose. The subs will not be operational for over a decade, by which time China will surely have expanded its military forces to deal with this new military threat, just as it has done to deal with the fact that it is ringed by nuclear-armed missiles in some of the 800 military bases that the U.S. has around the world (China has one, Djibouti).

Toohey outlines the naval military balance that is disrupted further by AUKUS. It's worth quoting directly to help understand how China threatens the U.S. — not in the Caribbean or the California coast, but on China's borders:

China's nuclear weapons are so inferior that it couldn't be confident of deterring a retaliatory strike from the US. Take the example of nuclear-powered, ballistic missile-armed submarines (SSBNs). China has four Jin-class SSBNs. Each can carry 12 missiles, each with a single warhead. The subs are easy to detect because they're noisy. According to the US Office of Naval Intelligence, each is noisier than a Soviet submarine first launched in 1976. Russian and US subs are now much quieter. China is expected to acquire another four SSBNs that are a little quieter by 2030. However, the missiles on the subs won't have the range to reach the continental US from near their base on Hainan island in the South China Sea. To target the continental US, they would have to reach suitable locations in the Pacific Ocean. However, they are effectively bottled up inside the South China Sea. To escape, they have to pass through a series of chokepoints where they would be easily sunk by US hunter killer nuclear submarines of the type the [Australian] Morrison government wants to buy. In contrast, the US has 14 Ohio-class SSBNs. Each can launch 24 Trident missiles, each containing eight independently targetable warheads able to reach anywhere on the globe. This means a single US submarine can destroy 192 cities, or other targets, compared to 12 for the Chinese submarine. The Ohio class is now being replaced by the bigger Columbia class. These [are being] constructed at the same time as new US hunter killer submarines.

That's before eight new advanced nuclear subs are built for Australia. In nuclear forces generally and other relevant military capacity, China is of course far behind the U.S., as are all potential U.S. adversaries combined.

AUKUS does serve a purpose, however: to establish more firmly that the U.S. intends to rule the world, even if that requires escalating the threat of war, possibly terminal nuclear war, in a highly volatile region. And eschewing such "sissified" measures as diplomacy.

It is not the only example. One of these should have been on the front pages in the past few weeks as the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, executing Trump's cynical sell-out of Afghans in his February 2020 deal with the Taliban.

The obvious question is: Why did the Bush administration invade 20 years ago? The U.S. had no interest in Afghanistan, as Bush's pronouncements at the time made explicit; the real prize was Iraq, then beyond. Bush also made it clear that the administration also had little interest in Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda. That lack of concern was made fully explicit by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld when the Taliban offered surrender. "We do not negotiate surrenders," Rumsfeld stormed.

The only plausible explanation for the invasion was given by the most highly respected leader of the anti-Taliban resistance, Abdul Haq. He was [interviewed](#) shortly after the invasion by Asia scholar Anatol Lieven.

Haq said that the invasion will kill many Afghans and undermine promising Afghan efforts to undermine the Taliban regime from within, but that's not Washington's concern: "the US is trying to show its muscle, score a victory and scare everyone in the world. They don't care about the suffering of the Afghans or how many people we will lose."

That also seems a fair description of current U.S. strategy in "containing the China threat" by provocative escalation in place of diplomacy. It's no innovation in imperial history.

Returning to the responsibility of intellectuals and how it is being fulfilled, no elaboration should be necessary.

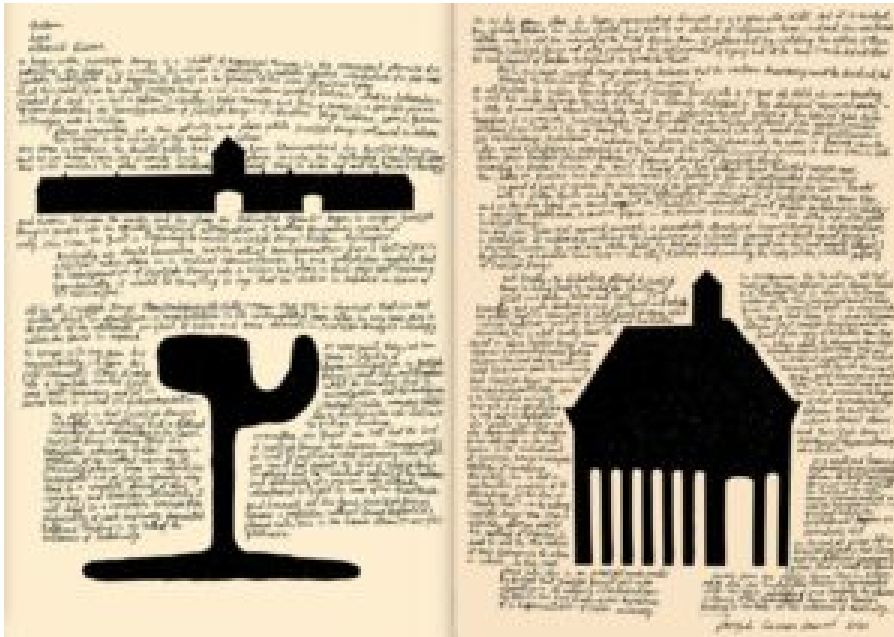
Source:

<https://truthout.org/articles/chomsky-its-life-and-death-intellectuals-cant-keep-serving-the-status-quo/>

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, 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 over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) IV - Goethe-Institut Amsterdam - September 2021 - June 2022



On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) - IV How to Explain Hare Hunting to a Dead German Artist [The usefulness of continuous measurement of the distance between Nostalgia and Melancholia] (September 2021 - June 2022)

A critical project concerning post-war artist Joseph Beuys, created by Joseph Sassoon Semah, curator Linda Bouws

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(see

<https://rozenbergquarterly.com/on-friendship-collateral-damage-iv-a-critical-project-on-post-war-artists-joseph-beuys/>

Goethe-Institut Amsterdam, Herengracht 470, Amsterdam
28 October 2021- 23 December 2021

Joseph Sassoon Semah - Exhibition 'On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) IV'
Monday-Friday, 10.00 - 17.00 p.m.

See for more information Goethe-Institut

https://www.goethe.de/ins/nl/nl/ver.cfm?event_id=22376581

Goethe-Institut Amsterdam, Herengracht 470, Amsterdam
28 October 2021, 20.00 pm, Performance and Meeting

Mati Shemoelof (Poet, Author, Editor, Journalist, Berlin & Joseph Sassoon Semah. (English)

Discussion about the creative activities of Joseph Beuys adhere to Eurocentric culture in general and to post-war German culture in particular. And yet, what will happen when two Iraqi Jews, i.e. Babylonian Jews - who live in two European capitals, Berlin and Amsterdam, respectively - decided to deconstruct Beuys's post war art production.

Could we give these two guests who became our host free speech, and should we listen to their desire to reclaim the Jewish Babylonian tradition from Joseph Beuys' art?

Most of the research on Joseph Beuys artistic activity has been generated by theories concerning Eurocentric culture, values and experiences, however this time we have the opportunity to hear other voices, different reading that criticizes Beuys' work.

See for more information & tickets
Goethe-Institut https://www.goethe.de/ins/nl/nl/ver.cfm?event_id=22378810



*Goethe-Institut Amsterdam, Herengracht 470,
Amsterdam*

*11 November 2021, 20.00 pm, Performance and
Meeting*

Joseph Sassoon Semah & Rick Vercauteren

Joseph Sassoon Semah On Joseph Beuys and Wolf Vostell: Zwischen Dichtung
und Wahrheit. (English)

Joseph Beuys manifested himself post-war as the new Messiah, as a healer, as a shaman for the Germans, to free himself as perpetrator and free the Germans of their guilt. Vostell embodies the victim and claims to embody the German guilt, to fill the vacuum that the genocide left behind. Wolf Vostell claimed since the early 1950's that his mother was a Sephardic Jew. However, it wasn't until many years later that scholars began to inquire about Wolf's 'fabricated' autobiography. Joseph Sassoon Semah and Rick Vercauteren will focus on the German artist duo Joseph Beuys and Wolf Vostell.

See for more information & tickets
Goethe-Institut https://www.goethe.de/ins/nl/nl/ver.cfm?event_id=22379296

The project is realised in part with the support of Mondriaan Fund, the public fund for visual art and cultural heritage and Redstone Natuursteen & Projecten.

Occupy Wall Street Was Good, But It Was Never Going To Be Good Enough



CJ

Polychroniou

Social movements can create change, but need proper organizational structures to dismantle hegemonic power.

Ten years ago, the Occupy Wall Street movement was born with protests in Manhattan's financial district. Its aim was to draw attention to the huge gap that had grown between the super-rich and average Americans in the age of global neoliberalism.

While it is uncertain whether it even qualifies as an actual social movement, Wall Street Occupy was a smashing success: its powerful message of the richest 1 percent owning more of the country's wealth than any other time in recent history captured the public imagination, provided the impetus for the emergence of a new wave of social activism, both in the US and abroad, and eventually became a rallying point for the left-wing of the Democratic Party.

However, like most actual social movements, Occupy Wall Street was short-lived and its lack of specific demands did not change the realities on the ground: economic inequalities have continued to grow since and Wall Street remains a dominant player in the US and world economy alike.

Social movements emerge on account of the existence of dysfunction within a political or economic system. Systemic inequality and social and environmental injustice are the primary drives behind the rise of most forms of social activism in today's world, yet the decision for people to become politically active has simple psychological roots. Social movements emerge only when discontent has become quite prevalent among a sizable segment of the citizenry. Indeed, it was feelings of deprivation and discontent that gave rise to the anti-globalization movement of

the 1990s, to the pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s, and to the Russian protest movements in 2011-2012. Nonetheless, all of those movements also phased out rather quickly, without accomplishing their intended goals, although they did cause quite a stir at the time.

The problem with social movements is that they are informal groupings of individuals or organizations which, while they can generate significant attention around an issue or cause, influence positively public opinion, and initiate some form of tangible change, they lack the instruments to dismantle hegemonic power. Put differently, social movements, generally speaking, do not last very long and ultimately fail to dismantle existing power structures because they do not invest in organizational structures.

From the above, one may be quick to jump to the conclusion that participation in political parties is the most effective way for citizens in contemporary societies to bring about structural change. Not so fast. While this may have been the case in the past, it is no longer so today because political parties, including those of left and radical ideological orientation, have undergone fundamental organizational changes. With rare exceptions, they have moved away from being mass parties and have abandoned any pretext of actually seeking to bring about profound social and economic changes. Party identification has also declined everywhere in the world, and even the distinction between Left and Right has broken down.

In sum, the best hope we have for reshaping the world is with social activism and protest movements. But sustainable activism requires implementing organizational structures which are currently missing from most social movements. It would be most helpful in this case if contemporary social movements looked to the history of the old radical Left and the way those parties managed to sustain organizational continuity while fighting for a new social and economic order under political and social conditions far more adverse than what exists today. And to the way the Austrian communist party of today has managed, through a steadfast course in old-fashioned class politics, to engage itself in community activism in the city of Graz, a strategy which led to its shocking victory last month in the city's municipal elections.

“Crown heads, wealth, and privilege may well tremble should ever again the black and red unite,” Otto von Bismarck allegedly said in connection with the political

environment of his time.

We might be able one day to express something along similar lines if social movements started to implement the organizational structures of the Old Left.

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Source:

<https://www.commondreams.org/occupy-wall-street-was-good-it-was-never-going-be-good-enough>

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