

Trump's America And The New World Order: A Conversation With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky ~ Photo:
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For the prelude to this interview, read yesterday's conversation with Noam Chomsky on "[Trump and the Flawed Nature of US Democracy](#)", which exposes the pitfalls of the political system that made Trump's rise to power a reality.

Are Donald Trump's selections for his cabinet and other top administration positions indicative of a man who is ready to "drain the swamp?" Is the president-elect bent on putting China on the defensive? What does he have in mind for the Middle East? And why did Barack Obama choose at this juncture — that is, toward the end of his presidency — to have the US abstain from a UN resolution condemning Israeli settlements? Are new trends and tendencies in the world order emerging? In this exclusive Truthout interview, Noam Chomsky addresses these critical questions just two weeks before the White House receives its new occupant.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the president-elect's cabinet is being filled by financial and corporate bigwigs and military leaders. Such selections hardly reconcile with

Trump's pre-election promises to "drain the swamp," so what should we expect from this megalomaniac and phony populist insofar as the future of the Washington establishment is concerned?

Noam Chomsky: In this respect — note the qualification — Time magazine put it fairly well (in a Dec. 26 column by Joe Klein): "While some supporters may balk, Trump's decision to embrace those who have wallowed in the Washington muck has spread a sense of relief among the capital's political class. 'It shows,' says one GOP consultant close to the President-elect's transition, 'that he's going to govern like a normal Republican'."

There surely is some truth to this. Business and investors plainly think so. The stock market boomed right after the election, led by the financial companies that Trump denounced during his campaign, particularly the leading demon of his rhetoric, Goldman Sachs. [According to Bloomberg News](#), "The firm's surging stock price," up 30 percent in the month after the election, "has been the largest driver behind the Dow Jones Industrial Average's climb toward 20,000." The stellar market performance of Goldman Sachs is based largely on Trump's reliance on the demon to run the economy, buttressed by the promised roll-back in regulations, setting the stage for the next financial crisis (and taxpayer bailout). Other big gainers are energy corporations, health insurers and construction firms, all expecting huge profits from the administration's announced plans. These include a Paul Ryan-style fiscal program of tax cuts for the rich and corporations, increased military spending, turning the health system over even more to insurance companies with predictable consequences, taxpayer largesse for a privatized form of credit-based infrastructure development, and other "normal Republican" gifts to wealth and privilege at taxpayer expense. Rather plausibly, economist [Larry Summers describes the fiscal program](#) as "the most misguided set of tax changes in US history [which] will massively favor the top 1 per cent of income earners, threaten an explosive rise in federal debt, complicate the tax code and do little if anything to spur growth."

But, great news for those who matter.

There are, however, some losers in the corporate system. Since November 8, gun sales, which more than doubled under Obama, have been dropping sharply, perhaps because of lessened fears that the government will take away the assault rifles and other armaments we need to protect ourselves from the Feds. Sales rose through the year as polls showed Clinton in the lead, but after the election,

[the Financial Times reported](#), “shares in gun makers such as Smith & Wesson and Sturm Ruger plunged.” By mid-December, “the two companies had fallen 24 per cent and 17 per cent since the election, respectively.” But all is not lost for the industry. As a spokesman explains, “To put it in perspective, US consumer sales of firearms are greater than the rest of the world combined. It’s a pretty big market.”

Normal Republicans cheer Trump’s choice for Office of Management and Budget, Mick Mulvaney, one of the most extreme fiscal hawks, though a problem does arise. How will a fiscal hawk manage a budget designed to massively escalate the deficit? In a post-fact world, maybe that doesn’t matter.

Also cheering to “normal Republicans” is the choice of the radically anti-labor Andy Puzder for secretary of labor, though here too a contradiction may lurk in the background. As the ultrarich CEO of restaurant chains, he relies on the most easily exploited non-union labor for the dirty work, typically immigrants, which doesn’t comport well with the plans to deport them en masse. The same problem arises for the infrastructure programs; the private firms that are set to profit from these initiatives rely heavily on the same labor source, though perhaps that problem can be finessed by redesigning the “beautiful wall” so that it will only keep out Muslims.

Is this to say then that Trump will be a “normal” Republican as America’s 45th President?

In such respects as the ones mentioned above, Trump proved himself very quickly to be a normal Republican, if to the extremist side. But in other respects he may not be a normal Republican, if that means something like a mainstream establishment Republican — people like Mitt Romney, whom Trump went out of his way to humiliate in his familiar style, just as he did to McCain and others of this category. But it’s not only his style that causes offense and concern. His actions do as well.

Take just the two most significant issues that we face, the most significant that humans have ever faced in their brief history on earth; issues that bear on species survival: nuclear war and global warming. Shivers went up the spine of many “normal Republicans,” as of others who care about the fate of the species, when Trump tweeted that “The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding

nukes.” Expanding nuclear capability means casting to the winds the treaties that have sharply reduced nuclear arsenals and that sane analysts hope may reduce them much further, in fact, to zero, as advocated by such normal Republicans as Henry Kissinger and Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz, and by Reagan, in some of his moments. Concerns did not abate when Trump went on to tell the cohost of TV show Morning Joe “Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass.” And it wasn’t too comforting even when his White House team tried to explain that “The Donald” didn’t say what he said.

Nor do concerns abate because Trump was presumably reacting to Putin’s statement: “We need to strengthen the military potential of strategic nuclear forces, especially with missile complexes that can reliably penetrate any existing and prospective missile defense systems. We must carefully monitor any changes in the balance of power and in the political-military situation in the world, especially along Russian borders, and quickly adapt plans for neutralizing threats to our country.”

Whatever one thinks of these words, they have a defensive cast and as Putin has stressed, they are in large part a reaction to the highly provocative installation of a missile defense system on Russia’s border on the pretext of defense against nonexistent Iranian weapons. Trump’s tweet intensifies fears about how he might react when crossed, for example, by unwillingness of some adversary to bow to his vaunted negotiating skills. If the past is any guide he might, after all, find himself in a situation where he must decide within a few minutes whether to blow up the world.

The other crucial issue is environmental catastrophe. It cannot be stressed too strongly that Trump won two victories on November 8: the lesser one in the Electoral College and the greater one in Marrakech, where some 200 countries were seeking to put teeth in the promises of the Paris negotiations on climate change. On Election Day, the conference heard a dire report on the state of the Anthropocene from the World Meteorological Organization. As the results of the election came in, the stunned participants virtually abandoned the proceedings, wondering if anything could survive the withdrawal of the most powerful state in world history. Nor can one stress too often the astonishing spectacle of the world placing its hopes for salvation in China, while the leader of the free world stands alone as a wrecking machine.

Although — amazingly — most ignored these astounding events, establishment circles did have some response. In [Foreign Affairs](#), [Varun Sivaram](#) and [Sagatom Saha](#) warned of the costs to the US of “ceding climate leadership to China,” and the dangers to the world because China “would lead on climate-change issues only insofar as doing so would advance its national interests” — unlike the altruistic United States, which supposedly labors selflessly only for the benefit of mankind.

How intent Trump is on driving the world to the precipice was revealed by his appointments, including his choice of two militant climate change deniers, Myron Ebell and Scott Pruitt, to take charge of dismantling the Environmental Protection Agency that was established under Richard Nixon, with another denier slated to head the Department of Interior.

But that’s only the beginning. The cabinet appointments would be comical if the implications were not so serious. For Department of Energy, a man who said it should be eliminated (when he could remember its name) and is perhaps unaware that its main concern is nuclear weapons. For Department of Education, another billionaire, Betsy DeVos, who is dedicated to undermining and perhaps eliminating the public school system and who, [as Lawrence Krause reminds us in the New Yorker](#), is a fundamentalist Christian member of a Protestant denomination holding that “all scientific theories be subject to Scripture” and that “Humanity is created in the image of God; all theorizing that minimizes this fact and all theories of evolution that deny the creative activity of God are rejected.” Perhaps the Department should request funding from Saudi sponsors of Wahhabi madrassas to help the process along.

DeVos’s appointment is no doubt attractive to the evangelicals who flocked to Trump’s standard and constitute a large part of the base of today’s Republican Party. She should also be able to work amicably with Vice-President-elect Mike Pence, one of the “prized warriors [of] a cabal of vicious zealots who have long craved an extremist Christian theocracy,” [as Jeremy Scahill details in The Intercept](#), reviewing his shocking record on other matters as well.

And so it continues, case by case. But not to worry. As James Madison assured his colleagues as they were framing the Constitution, a national republic would “extract from the mass of the Society the purest and noblest characters which it contains.”

What about the choice of Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State?

One partial exception to the above is choice of ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson for Secretary of State, which has aroused some hope among those across the spectrum who are rightly concerned with the rising and extremely hazardous tensions with Russia. Tillerson, like Trump in some of his pronouncements, has called for diplomacy rather than confrontation, which is all to the good — until we remember the sable lining of the beam of sunshine. The motive is to allow ExxonMobil to exploit vast Siberian oil fields and so to accelerate the race to disaster to which Trump and associates, and the Republican Party rather generally, are committed.

And how about Trump's national security staff — do they fit the mold of "normal" Republicans, or are they also part of the extreme Right?

Normal Republicans might be somewhat ambivalent about Trump's national security staff. It is led by National Security Advisor Gen. Michael Flynn, a radical Islamophobe who declares that Islam is not a religion but rather, a political ideology, like fascism, which is at war with us, so we must defend ourselves, presumably against the whole Muslim world — a fine recipe for generating terrorists, not to speak of far worse consequences. Like the Red Menace of earlier years, this Islamic ideology is penetrating deep into American society, Flynn declaims. They are, he says, being helped by Democrats, who have voted to impose Sharia law in Florida, much as their predecessors served the Commies, as Joe McCarthy famously demonstrated. Indeed, there are "over 100 cases around the country," including Texas, Flynn warned in a speech in San Antonio. To ward off the imminent threat, Flynn is a board member of ACT!, which pushes state laws banning Sharia law, plainly an imminent threat in states like Oklahoma, where 70 percent of voters approved legislation to prevent the courts from applying this grim menace to the judicial system.

Second to Flynn in the national security apparatus is Secretary of Defense Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis, considered a relative moderate. Mad Dog [has explained](#) that "It's fun to shoot some people." He achieved his fame by leading the assault on Fallujah in November 2004, one of the most vicious crimes of the Iraq invasion. A man who is "just great," according to the president-elect: "the closest thing we have to Gen. George Patton."

In your view, is Trump bent on a collision course with China?

It's hard to say. Concerns were voiced about Trump's attitudes toward China,

again full of contradictions, particularly his pronouncements on trade, which are almost meaningless in the current system of corporate globalization and complex international supply chains. Eyebrows were raised over his sharp departure from long-standing policy in his phone call with Taiwan's president, but even more by his implying that the US might reject China's concerns over Taiwan unless China accepts his trade proposals, thus linking trade policy "to an issue of great-power politics over which China may be willing to go to war," the business press warned.

What of Trump's views and stance on the Middle East? They seem to be in line with those of "normal" Republicans, right?

Unlike with China, normal Republicans did not seem dismayed by Trump's tweet foray into Middle East diplomacy, again breaking with standard protocol, demanding that Obama veto UN Security Council resolution 2334, which reaffirmed "that the policy and practices of Israel in establishing settlements in the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967 have no legal validity and constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East [and] Calls once more upon Israel, as the occupying Power, to abide scrupulously by the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, to rescind its previous measures and to desist from taking any action which would result in changing the legal status and geographical nature and materially affecting the demographic composition of the Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem, and, in particular, not to transfer parts of its own civilian population into the occupied Arab territories."

Nor did they object when he informed Israel that it can ignore the lame duck administration and just wait until January 20, when all will be in order. What kind of order? That remains to be seen. Trump's unpredictability serves as a word of caution.

What we know so far is Trump's enthusiasm for the religious ultraright in Israel and the settler movement generally. Among his largest charitable contributions are gifts to the West Bank settlement of Beth El in honor of David Friedman, his choice as Ambassador to Israel. Friedman is president of American Friends of Beth El Institutions. The settlement, which is at the religious ultranationalist extreme of the settler movement, is also a favorite of the family of Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, reported to be one of Trump's closest advisers. A lead beneficiary of the Kushner family's contributions, [the Israeli press reports](#), "is a yeshiva headed by a militant rabbi who has urged Israeli soldiers to disobey

orders to evacuate settlements and who has argued that homosexual tendencies arise from eating certain foods.” [Other beneficiaries](#) include “a radical yeshiva in Yitzhar that has served as a base for violent attacks against Palestinian’s villages and Israeli security forces.”

In isolation from the world, Friedman does not regard Israeli settlement activity as illegal and opposes a ban on construction for Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In fact, he appears to favor Israel’s annexation of the West Bank. That would not pose a problem for the Jewish state, Friedman explains, since the number of Palestinians living in the West Bank is exaggerated and therefore a large Jewish majority would remain after annexation. In a post-fact world, such pronouncements are legitimate, though they might become accurate in the boring world of fact after another mass expulsion. Jews who support the international consensus on a two-state settlement are not just wrong, [Friedman says](#), they are “worse than kapos,” the Jews who were controlling other inmates in service to their Nazi masters in the concentration camps — the ultimate insult.

On receiving the report of his nomination, Friedman said he looked forward to moving the US embassy to “Israel’s eternal capital, Jerusalem,” in accord with Trump’s announced plans. In the past, such proposals were withdrawn, but today they might actually be fulfilled, perhaps advancing the prospects of a war with the Muslim world, as Trump’s National Security Adviser appears to recommend.

Returning to UNSC 2334 and its interesting aftermath, it is important to recognize that the resolution is nothing new. The quote given above was not from UNSC 2334 but from UNSC Resolution 446, passed on March 12, 1979, reiterated in essence in UNSC 2334.

UNSC 446 passed 12-0 with the US abstaining, joined by the UK and Norway. Several resolutions followed, reaffirming 446. One resolution of particular interest was even stronger than 446-2334, calling on Israel “to dismantle the existing settlements” (UNSC Resolution 465, passed in March 1980). This resolution passed unanimously, no abstentions.

The Government of Israel did not have to wait for the UN Security Council (and more recently, the World Court) to learn that its settlements are in gross violation of international law. In September 1967, only weeks after Israel’s conquest of the occupied territories, in a [Top Secret document](#), the government was informed by

the legal adviser to [Israel's] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the distinguished international lawyer Theodor Meron, that "civilian settlement in the administered territories [Israel's term for the occupied territories] contravenes explicit provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention." Meron explained further that the prohibition against transfer of settlers to the occupied territories "is categorical and not conditional upon the motives for the transfer or its objectives. Its purpose is to prevent settlement in occupied territory of citizens of the occupying state." Meron therefore advised that "If it is decided to go ahead with Jewish settlement in the administered territories, it seems to me vital, therefore, that settlement is carried out by military and not civilian entities. It is also important, in my view, that such settlement is in the framework of camps and is, on the face of it, of a temporary rather than permanent nature."

Meron's advice was followed. Settlement has often been disguised by the subterfuge suggested, the "temporary military entities" turning out later to be civilian settlements. The device of military settlement also has the advantage of providing a means to expel Palestinians from their lands on the pretext that a military zone is being established. Deceit was scrupulously planned, beginning as soon as Meron's authoritative report was delivered to the government. As [documented by Israeli scholar Avi Raz](#), in September 1967, on the day a second civilian settlement came into being in the West Bank, the government decided that "as a 'cover' for the purpose of [Israel's] diplomatic campaign," the new settlements should be presented as army settlements and the settlers should be given the necessary instructions in case they were asked about the nature of their settlement. The Foreign Ministry directed Israel's diplomatic missions to present the settlements in the occupied territories as military "strongpoints" and to emphasize their alleged security importance.'

Similar practices continue to the present.

In response to the Security Council orders of 1979-80 to dismantle existing settlements and to establish no new ones, Israel undertook a rapid expansion of settlements with the cooperation of both of the major Israeli political blocs, Labor and Likud, always with lavish US material support.

The primary differences today are that the US is now alone against the whole world, and that it is a different world. Israel's flagrant violations of Security Council orders, and of international law, are by now far more extreme than they

were 35 years ago, and are arousing far greater condemnation in much of the world. The contents of Resolutions 446-2334 are therefore taken more seriously. Hence, the revealing reactions to 2334 and to Secretary of State John Kerry's explanation of the US vote.

In the Arab world, the reactions seem to have been muted: We've been here before. In Europe they were generally supportive. In the US and Israel, in contrast, coverage and commentary were extensive, and there was considerable hysteria. These are further indications of the increasing isolation of the US on the world stage. Under Obama, that is. Under Trump US isolation will likely increase further and indeed, already did, even before he took office, as we have seen.

Why did Obama choose abstention from the UN vote on Israeli settlements at this juncture, i.e., only a month or so before the end of his presidency?

Just why Obama chose abstention rather than veto is an open question; we do not have direct evidence. But there are some plausible guesses. There had been some ripples of surprise (and ridicule) after Obama's February 2011 veto of a UNSC Resolution calling for implementation of official US policy, and he may have felt that it would be too much to repeat it if he is to salvage anything of his tattered legacy among sectors of the population that have some concern for international law and human rights. It is also worth remembering that among liberal Democrats, if not Congress, and particularly among the young, opinion about Israel-Palestine has been moving toward criticism of Israeli policies in recent years, so much so that 60 percent of Democrats "support imposing sanctions or more serious action" in reaction to Israeli settlements, according to a December 2016 Brookings Institute poll. By now the core of support for Israeli policies in the US has shifted to the far right, including the evangelical base of the Republican Party. Perhaps these were factors in Obama's decision, with his legacy in mind.

The 2016 abstention aroused furor in Israel and in the US Congress as well, among both Republicans and leading Democrats, including proposals to defund the UN in retaliation for the world's crime. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu denounced Obama for his "underhanded, anti-Israel" actions. His office accused Obama of "colluding" behind the scenes with this "gang-up" by the Security Council, producing particles of "evidence" that hardly rise to the level of sick humor. A [senior Israeli official added](#) that the abstention "revealed the true face of the Obama administration," adding that "now we can understand what we have been dealing with for the past eight years."

Reality is rather different. Obama has, in fact, broken all records in support for Israel, both diplomatic and financial. The reality is [described accurately by Financial Times Middle East specialist David Gardner](#): “Mr. Obama’s personal dealings with Mr. Netanyahu may often have been poisonous, but he has been the most pro-Israel of presidents: the most prodigal with military aid and reliable in wielding the US veto at the Security Council.... The election of Donald Trump has so far brought little more than turbo-frothed tweets to bear on this and other geopolitical knots. But the auguries are ominous. An irredentist government in Israel tilted towards the ultraright is now joined by a national populist administration in Washington fire-breathing Islamophobia.”

Public commentary on Obama’s decision and Kerry’s justification was split. Supporters generally [agreed with Thomas Friedman](#) that “Israel is clearly now on a path toward absorbing the West Bank’s 2.8 million Palestinians ... posing a demographic and democratic challenge.” In a [New York Times review of the state of the two-state solution](#) defended by Obama-Kerry and threatened with extinction by Israeli policies, Max Fisher asks, “Are there other solutions?” He then turns to the possible alternatives, all of them “multiple versions of the so-called one-state solution” that poses a “demographic and democratic challenge”: too many Arabs — perhaps soon a majority — in a “Jewish and democratic state.”

In the conventional fashion, commentators assume that there are two alternatives: the two-state solution advocated by the world, or some version of the “one-state solution.” Ignored consistently is a third alternative, the one that Israel has been implementing quite systematically since shortly after the 1967 war and that is now very clearly taking shape before our eyes: a Greater Israel, sooner or later incorporated into Israel proper, including a vastly expanded Jerusalem (already annexed in violation of Security Council orders) and any other territories that Israel finds valuable, while excluding areas of heavy Palestinian population concentration and slowly removing Palestinians within the areas scheduled for incorporation within Greater Israel. As in neo-colonies generally, Palestinian elites will be able to enjoy western standards in Ramallah, with “90 per cent of the population of the West Bank living in 165 separate ‘islands,’ ostensibly under the control of the [Palestinian Authority]” but actual Israeli control, [as reported by Nathan Thrall](#), senior analyst with the International Crisis Group. Gaza will remain under crushing siege, separated from the West Bank in violation of the Oslo Accords.

The third alternative is another piece of the “reality” described by David Gardner.

In an interesting and revealing comment, Netanyahu denounced the “gang-up” of the world as proof of “old-world bias against Israel,” a phrase reminiscent of Donald Rumsfeld’s Old Europe-New Europe distinction in 2003.

It will be recalled that the states of Old Europe were the bad guys, the major states of Europe, which dared to respect the opinions of the overwhelming majority of their populations and thus refused to join the US in the crime of the century, the invasion of Iraq. The states of New Europe were the good guys, which overruled an even larger majority and obeyed the master. The most honorable of the good guys was Spain’s Jose Maria Aznar, who rejected virtually unanimous opposition to the war in Spain and was rewarded by being invited to join Bush and Blair in announcing the invasion.

This quite illuminating display of utter contempt for democracy, along with others like it at the same time, passed virtually unnoticed, understandably. The task at the time was to praise Washington for its passionate dedication to democracy, as illustrated by “democracy promotion” in Iraq, which suddenly became the party line after the “single question” (will Saddam give up his WMD?) was answered the wrong way.

Netanyahu is adopting much the same stance. The old world that is biased against Israel is the entire UN Security Council; more specifically, anyone in the world who has some lingering commitment to international law and human rights. Luckily for the Israeli far right, that excludes the US Congress and — very forcefully — the president-elect and his associates.

The Israeli government is, of course, cognizant of these developments. It is therefore seeking to shift its base of support to authoritarian states, such as Singapore, China and Modi’s right-wing Hindu nationalist India, now becoming a very natural ally with its drift toward ultranationalism, reactionary internal policies and hatred of Islam. The reasons for Israel’s looking in this direction for support [are outlined by Mark Heller](#), principal research associate at Tel Aviv’s Institution for National Security Studies. “Over the long term,” he explains, “there are problems for Israel in its relations with Western Europe and with the U.S.,” while in contrast, the important Asian countries “don’t seem to indicate much interest about how Israel gets along with the Palestinians, Arabs, or anyone else.”

In short, China, India, Singapore and other favored allies are less influenced by the kinds of liberal and humane concerns that pose increasing threats to Israel.

Are we then in the midst of new trends and tendencies in world order?

I believe so, and the tendencies developing in world order merit some attention. As noted, the US is becoming even more isolated than it has been in recent years, when US-run polls — unreported in the US but surely known in Washington — revealed that world opinion regarded the US as by far the leading threat to world peace, no one else even close. Under Obama, the US is now alone in abstention on the illegal Israel settlements, against an otherwise unanimous Security Council. With President Trump joining his bipartisan congressional supporters on this issue, the US will be even more isolated in the world in support of Israeli crimes.

Since November 8, the US is isolated on the crucial matter of global warming, a threat to the survival of organized human life in anything like its present form. If Trump makes good on his promise to exit from the Iran deal, it is likely that the other participants will persist, leaving the US still more isolated from Europe.

The US is also much more isolated from its Latin American “backyard” than in the past, and will be even more isolated if Trump backs off from Obama’s halting steps to normalize relations with Cuba, undertaken to ward off the likelihood that the US would be pretty much excluded from hemispheric organizations because of its continuing assault on Cuba, in international isolation.

Much the same is happening in Asia, as even close US allies (apart from Japan) — and even the UK — flock to the China-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the China-based Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, in this case including Japan. The China-based Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) incorporates the Central Asian states, Siberia with its rich resources, India, Pakistan and soon, probably Iran, and perhaps Turkey. The SCO has rejected the US request for observer status and demanded that the US remove all military bases from the region.

Immediately after the Trump election, we witnessed the intriguing spectacle of German chancellor Angela Merkel taking the lead in lecturing Washington on liberal values and human rights. Meanwhile, since November 8, the world looks to China for leadership in saving the world from environmental catastrophe, while the US, in splendid isolation once again, devotes itself to undermining these

efforts.

US isolation is not complete, of course. As was made very clear in the reaction to Trump's electoral victory, the US has the enthusiastic support of the xenophobic ultraright in Europe, including its neofascist elements. The return of the right in parts of Latin America offers the US opportunities for alliances there as well. And the US retains its close alliance with the dictatorships of the Gulf and Egypt, and with Israel, which is also separating itself from more liberal and democratic sectors in Europe and linking with authoritarian regimes that are not concerned with Israel's violations of international law and harsh attacks on elementary human rights.

The developing picture suggests the emergence of a New World Order, one that is rather different from the usual portrayals within the doctrinal system.

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Trump And The Flawed Nature Of US Democracy: An Interview With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky

Trump's presidential victory exposed to the whole world the flawed nature of the US model of democracy. Beginning January 20, both the country and the world

will have to face a political leader with copious conflicts of interest who considers his unpredictable and destructive style to be a leadership asset. In this exclusive interview for [Truthout](#), world-renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky sheds light on the type of democratic model the US has designed and elaborates on the political import of Trump's victory for the two major parties, as this new political era begins.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, I want to start by asking you to reflect on the following: Trump won the presidential election even though he lost the popular vote. In this context, if "one person, one vote" is a fundamental principle behind every legitimate model of democracy, what type of democracy prevails in the US, and what will it take to undo the anachronism of the Electoral College?

Noam Chomsky: The Electoral College was originally supposed to be a deliberative body drawn from educated and privileged elites. It would not necessarily respond to public opinion, which was not highly regarded by the founders, to put it mildly. "The mass of people ... seldom judge or determine right," as Alexander Hamilton put it during the framing of the Constitution, expressing a common elite view. Furthermore, the infamous 3/5th clause ensured the slave states an extra boost, a very significant issue considering their prominent role in the political and economic institutions. As the party system took shape in the 19th century, the Electoral College became a mirror of the state votes, which can give a result quite different from the popular vote because of the first-past-the-post rule — as it did once again in this election. Eliminating the Electoral College would be a good idea, but it's virtually impossible as the political system is now constituted. It is only one of many factors that contribute to the regressive character of the [US] political system, which, as [Seth Ackerman observes](#) in an interesting article in Jacobin magazine, would not pass muster by European standards.

Ackerman focuses on one severe flaw in the US system: the dominance of organizations that are not genuine political parties with public participation but rather elite-run candidate-selection institutions often described, not unrealistically, as the two factions of the single business party that dominates the political system. They have protected themselves from competition by many devices that bar genuine political parties that grow out of free association of participants, as would be the case in a properly functioning democracy. Beyond that there is the overwhelming role of concentrated private and corporate wealth,

not just in the presidential campaigns, as has been well documented, particularly by Thomas Ferguson, but also in Congress.

A [recent study by Ferguson](#), Paul Jorgensen and Jie Chen on “How Money Drives US Congressional Elections,” reveals a remarkably close correlation between campaign expenditures and electoral outcomes in Congress over decades. And extensive work in academic political science — particularly by [Martin Gilens](#), [Benjamin Page](#) and [Larry Bartlett](#) — reveals that most of the population is effectively unrepresented, in that their attitudes and opinions have little or no effect on decisions of the people they vote for, which are pretty much determined by the very top of the income-wealth scale. In the light of such factors as these, the defects of the Electoral College, while real, are of lesser significance.

To what extent is this presidential election a defining moment for Republicans and Democrats alike?

For the eight years of the Obama presidency, the Republican organization has hardly qualified as a political party. A more [accurate description was given](#) by the respected political analysts Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein of the conservative American Enterprise Institute: the party became an “insurgent outlier — ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”

Its guiding principle was: Whatever Obama tries to do, we have to block it, but without providing some sensible alternative. The goal was to make the country ungovernable, so that the insurgency could take power. Its infantile antics on the Affordable Care Act are a good illustration: endless votes to repeal it in favor of — nothing. Meanwhile the party has become split between the wealthy and privileged “establishment,” devoted to the interests of their class, and the popular base that was mobilized when the establishment commitments to wealth and privilege became so extreme that it would be impossible to garner votes by presenting them accurately. It was therefore necessary to mobilize sectors that had always existed, but not as an organized political force: a strange amalgam of Christian evangelicals — a huge sector of the American population — nativists, white supremacists, white working and lower middle class victims of the neoliberal policies of the past generation, and others who are fearful and angry,

cast aside in the neoliberal economy while they perceive their traditional culture as being under attack. In past primaries, the candidates who rose from the base — Bachmann, Cain, Santorum and the rest — were so extreme that they were anathema to the establishment, who were able to use their ample resources to rid themselves of the plague and choose their favored candidate. The difference in 2016 is that they were unable to do it.

Now the Republican Party faces the task of formulating policies other than “No.” It must find a way to craft policies that will somehow pacify or marginalize the popular base while serving the real constituency of the establishment. It is from this sector that Trump is picking his close associates and cabinet members: not exactly coal miners, iron and steel workers, small business owners, or representatives of the concerns and demands of much of his voting base.

Democrats have to face the fact that for 40 years they have pretty much abandoned whatever commitment they had to working people. It’s quite shocking that Democrats have drifted so far from their modern New Deal origins that some workers are now voting for their class enemy, not for the party of FDR. A return to some form of social democracy should not be impossible, as indicated by the remarkable success of the Sanders campaign, which departed radically from the norm of elections effectively bought by wealth and corporate power. It is important to bear in mind that his “political revolution,” while quite appropriate for the times, would not have much surprised Dwight Eisenhower, another indication of the shift to the right during the neoliberal years.

If the Democratic Party is going to be a constructive force, it will have to develop and commit itself credibly to programs that address the valid concerns of the kind of people who voted for Obama, attracted by his message of “hope and change,” and when disillusioned by the disappearance of hope and the lack of change switched to the con man who declared that he will bring back what they have lost. It will be necessary to face honestly the malaise of much of the country, including people like those in the Louisiana Bayou whom Arlie Hochschild studied with such sensitivity and insight, and surely including the former working class constituency of the Democrats. The malaise is revealed in many ways, not least by the astonishing fact that mortality has increased in the country, something unknown in modern industrial democracies apart from catastrophic events. That’s particularly true among middle-aged whites, mainly traceable to what are sometimes called “diseases of despair” (opioids, alcohol, suicide, etc.). A

[statistical analysis reported by the Economist](#) found that these health metrics correlate with a remarkable 43 percent of the Republican Party's gains over the Democrats in the 2016 election, and remain significant and predictive even when controlling for race, education, age, gender, income, marital status, immigration and employment. These are all signs of severe collapse of much of the society, particularly in rural and working class areas. Furthermore, such initiatives have to be undertaken alongside of firm dedication to the rights and needs of those sectors of the population that have historically been denied rights and repressed, often in harsh and brutal ways.

No small task, but not beyond reach, if not by the Democrats, then by some political party replacing them, drawing from popular movements — and through the constant activism of these movements, quite apart from electoral politics.

Much of the rest of the world — with the notable exception of some of Europe's extreme nationalist and anti-immigrant political leaders — also seems to be rather anxious about Trump's aims and intents. Isn't that so?

Trump's victory was met in Europe with shock and disbelief. The general reaction was captured quite accurately, for instance, on the front cover of Der Spiegel [a major German weekly]. It depicted a caricature of Trump presented as a meteor hurtling toward Earth, mouth open, ready to swallow it up. And the lead headline read "*Das Ende Der Welt!*" ("The End of the World"). And in small letters below, "as we have known it." To be sure, there might be some truth to that concern, even if not exactly in the manner in which the artist and the authors who echoed that conception had in mind.

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America's Flawed Democracy



One of the basic principles of democracy is “one person, one vote”. Other criteria for an efficient and robust model of democracy include an informed and critically inclined citizenry and the

presence of a political culture catering to the “common good” instead of the self-centred whims and boundless greed of the rich and powerful.

Unfortunately, none of the above are representative features of American democracy: American politics is increasingly ruled by a moneyed oligarchy that calls the shots, while the country has shifted from a society of citizens to a society of consumers.

The highly flawed nature of American democracy has become more striking in recent years as the absence of political ethos works in tandem with massive economic inequality, job insecurity, and a declining standard of living to produce conditions ripe for corruption, manipulation of public opinion, and authoritarianism.

Indeed, the presidential election of 2016 speaks volumes of the crisis facing American democracy, making the world’s richest and most powerful nation resemble a “banana republic”.

Electing the electors

For starters, the contest for the White House was between a megalomaniac billionaire with no experience whatsoever in the “art of the possible” (but competent with entanglements with foreign governments and leaders, and an uncanny ability in twisting the tax law to his advantage) and a lifelong politician, widely regarded as a darling of Wall Street as well as a warmonger.

If this is not a sign of a moribund political system, the candidate elected to become the 45th president of the United States lost the popular vote by a bigger margin than of any other US President. Donald Trump was elected president by trailing Hillary Clinton by nearly three million votes.

This “democratic” anomaly is owing to the fact that US presidents are chosen by electors, not by popular vote.

To be sure, there is nothing in the constitution that grants American voters the right to choose their president. When American voters go to the polls to vote for a presidential candidate, what they are essentially doing is casting a vote for their preferred party’s nominated slate of electors.

The electoral college system is democracy's ugliest anachronism. Because of the design of the electoral college, intended by the founding fathers to prevent the masses from choosing directly who will run the country, a candidate can win the nationwide popular vote and still lose the presidency.

This is what happened in 2000, when Al Gore won nearly half a million more votes than George W Bush, but it was Bush who won the presidency by being declared winner in the state of Florida by less than 540 votes. And, of course, history repeated itself in the 2016 election.

Takeover of 'friendly fascism'

But this is not all. Voter turnout for the presidential elections in the world's outdated democratic model is consistently disturbingly low, an indication that many Americans may feel their vote doesn't count.

Indeed, voter turnout in the US is incredibly low compared with other advanced democratic nations around the world, ranking 31 out of 35 developed countries.

Some of the reasons for the low voter turnout in the US are attributed to the existence of the electoral college system itself, the two-party system, and even to the fact that elections are being held on a day when most people work.

More than 90 million eligible voters did not vote in the 2016 US presidential election - even though this was deemed to have been one of the most critical elections in recent memory owing to the highly inflammatory statements made by Trump about Mexicans, women, Muslims, and gays.

The reason why so many Americans are abstaining from voting, a cornerstone of democracy, is intrinsically related to the long-stemming pathologies of the American political culture, namely an individualistic and consumer-driven society where the great majority of people cannot name a single Supreme Court justice but trust the military to act in the public interest and act as a cheerleader for the US' militaristic adventures and wars, and a political system increasingly controlled by the wealthy and business.

The manufacturing of an individualistic, consumer-driven culture is intended to promote conformism, ignorance and apathy about public affairs, but also a perverted sense of patriotism which targets critically oriented voices as being "anti-American", thereby opening up a political space for the rise of the likes of Trump, Bush, and Ronald Reagan. That is to say, authoritarian, anti-labour, neoliberal, and jingoist politicians who wish to roll back whatever economic and

social progress average Americans have made since the 1960s and maintain the empire.

Undoubtedly, ever since the 1980s, the US has been moving closer and closer to a social order that Bertram Gross identified some 35 years ago as “friendly fascism”, an ever closer symbiosis between big business and big government, while citizens are relegated to the sphere of the purely “private”, enjoying material goods in exchange for social and political rights.

Indeed, looked at from various perspectives, it would seem that the 2016 US presidential election has brought to the surface all of the ills of America’s flawed democracy.

What happens next is hard to predict, but it is likely that very interesting times lie ahead both for “the land of the free and the home of the brave” as well as for the rest of the world.

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A World In Shambles: An Interview With C.J. Polychroniou



“We live in ominously dangerous times” stated the opening line of an article by C.J. Polychroniou (with Lily Sage) titled [“A New Economic System for a World in Rapid Disintegration,”](#) which was recently published in Truthout. And while the aforementioned piece was mainly a scathing critique of global neoliberal capitalism and a call for a new system of economic and social organization, its underlying thesis was that the world system is breaking down and that contemporary societies are in disarray.

Is the (Western) world in shambles? We interviewed C.J. Polychroniou about the current world situation, with emphasis on developments in Europe and the United States, and sought his views on a host of pertinent political, economic and social issues, including the rise of the far right and the capitulation of the left.

Marcus Rolle and Alexandra Boutri: Let’s start by asking — what exactly do you have in mind when you say, “We live in ominously dangerous times?”

C.J. Polychroniou: We live in a period of great global complexity, confusion and uncertainty. It should be beyond dispute that we are in the midst of a whirlpool of events and developments that are eroding our capability to manage human affairs in a way that is conducive to the attainment of a political and economic order based on stability, justice and sustainability. Indeed, the contemporary world is fraught with perils and challenges that will test severely humanity’s ability to maintain a steady course towards anything resembling a civilized life.

For starters, we have been witnessing the gradual erosion of socio-economic gains in much of the advanced industrialized world since at least the early 1980s, along with the rollback of the social state, while a tiny percentage of the population is amazingly wealthy beyond imagination that compromises democracy, subverts the “common good” and promotes a culture of dog-eat-dog world.

The pitfalls of massive economic inequality were identified even by ancient scholars, such as Aristotle, and yet we are still allowing the rich and powerful not only to dictate the nature of society we live in but also to impose conditions that

make it seem as if there is no alternative to the dominance of a system in which the interests of big business have primacy over social needs.

In this context, the political system known as representative democracy has fallen completely into the hands of a moneyed oligarchy which controls humanity's future. Democracy no longer exists. The main function of the citizenry in so-called "democratic" societies is to elect periodically the officials who are going to manage a system designed to serve the interests of a plutocracy and of global capitalism. The "common good" is dead, and in its place we have atomized, segmented societies in which the weak, the poor and powerless are left at the mercy of the gods.

I contend that the above features capture rather accurately the political culture and socio-economic landscape of "late capitalism." Nonetheless, the prospects for radical social change do not appear promising in light of the huge absence of unified ideological gestalts guiding social and political action. What we may see emerge in the years ahead is an even harsher and more authoritarian form of capitalism.

Then, there is the global warming phenomenon, which threatens to lead to the collapse of much of civilized life if it continues unabated. The extent to which the contemporary world is capable of addressing the effects of global climate change — frequent wildfires, longer periods of drought, rising sea levels, waves of mass migration — is indeed very much in doubt. Moreover, it is also unclear if a transition to clean energy sources suffices at this point in order to contain the further rising of temperatures. To be sure, global climate change will produce in the not-too-distant future major economic disasters, social upheavals and political instability.

If the climate change crisis is not enough to make one convinced that we live in ominously dangerous times, add to the above picture the ever-present threat of nuclear weapons. In fact, the threat of a nuclear war or the possibility of nuclear attacks is more pronounced in today's global environment than any other time since the dawn of the atomic age. A multi-polar world with nuclear weapons is a far more unstable environment than a bipolar world with nuclear weapons, particularly if we take into account the growing presence and influence of non-state actors, such as extreme terrorist organizations, and the spread of irrational and/or fundamentalist thinking, which has emerged as the new plague in many

countries around the world, including first and foremost the United States.

What is the state of the Left in today's Europe?

Since the collapse of Soviet communism, the European Left has been in a state of complete disarray, although the crisis of Europe's Left dates back to the 1970s — i.e., long before the collapse of “actually existing socialism.” But let's be clear. What do we mean today by the term European Left? The European Socialist and Social Democratic parties abandoned long ago any pretext to being “socialistic” and, in fact, have become advocates of austerity and staunch supporters of free-market capitalism. There are some communist parties still around, but most of them are completely marginalized and lack political influence.

Only in Greece do you have a communist party that still carries some influence inside the labor movement, but it is essentially a Stalinist party and has actually worked hard to maintain political stability and thus the status quo. Nonetheless, until very recently, the Greek Communist Party was far more popular than the Coalition of the Radical Left, popularly known as Syriza, which has been in government since January 2015, thanks to the terrible financial and economic crisis that broke out in early 2010 and has since converted the country to a German/European protectorate.

There are, of course, grassroots movements and parties of the radical Left to be found in virtually every European country, but they lack mass popular support. The rise of Syriza in Greece was seen as representing a new dawn for the European Left, but its complete sellout to the euro masters and its actual conversion to a neoliberal and thoroughly corrupt political party has actually been one of the biggest setbacks for progressive forces throughout the continent.

You were expressing strong reservations about Syriza, in fact through these pages, long before its rise to power. What actually went wrong with the Greek Radical Left?

Syriza was a loose organization of various leftist groups (old-fashioned euro communists, anarcho-communists, Maoists and even social democrats), and its appeal was confined mainly to the intellectual class. It lacked a cohesive ideological worldview and, in fact, [it] was difficult to pinpoint its stance on a variety of crucial issues due to the many political factions that it represented.

Naturally, the great majority of the Greek voters saw Syriza as being nothing

more than a movement of political clowns, with Alexis Tsipras at its helm. However, a close look around Syriza's core leadership would have revealed a group of people who were simply political opportunists, people hungry for power. To me, therefore, it was obvious that, in the event that Syriza came to power, two things would happen: first, a split between radicals and opportunists, and second, the capitulation of the opportunists (Alexis Tsipras and his gang) to the domestic economic elite and the euromasters. And this is precisely what has happened.

After five years of brutal austerity and the sharpest decline of the standard of living in any postwar European country, the Greek people voted into power Syriza, believing that its leader, Alexis Tsipras, would carry through with his pre-election promises of ending austerity and subsequently re-boosting the economy, tearing into pieces the EU/IMF bailout agreements, and forc[ing] the cancellation of a major portion of the debt. But shortly after coming to power, the opportunists realized that the option was either complete surrender to the capitalist forces or stepping down from power. They opted for the former, just so they could stay in power, even if it meant completing the carry out of the neoliberal agenda of the European Union and the IMF as part of the financial bailout of the country.

Syriza has been in power for nearly two years now, and, during this time, it has shoved the neoliberal agenda down the throat of the Greek people with more forcefulness and determination than any previous government. It agreed to a new, far more brutal and humiliating bailout plan, and is now overseeing the complete privatization of the economy and the further deterioration of the standard of living, thereby fulfilling the long-held view of the European neoliberal masters that Greek wages and the nation's standard of living should not be above those found in nearby Balkan countries like Bulgaria and Romania. Any public official or government minister standing in the way to the implementation of the neoliberal agenda was either isolated or pushed out of the government. Indeed, one of Tsipras' most pronounced traits as prime minister of Greece is the ease with which he is selling out his former comrades.

To secure his goals and aims, i.e., the sellout of the country, he even ended up recruiting as his lackeys academics from abroad, such as the president of the (allegedly progressive) Levy Institute, Dimitri Papadimitriou, and his wife, Rania Antonopoulos, who is currently serving as the Greek Alternate Minister for Combatting Unemployment. Shortly after having accepted the position of Minister of Economy and Development as a result of a recent cabinet reshuffle,

Papadimitriou — when asked about his research as an economist in which he challenged the European dogmas of austerity and neoliberalism and advocated the introduction of a “parallel” currency for the deeply ailing Greek economy — replied by saying that, “until last week I was an academic, and academics may say ... things. But when the time comes to implement a program, then they realize that some things may have been wrong!”

Of course, the Greek media had a feast over the amazing opportunism and the hypocrisy of this man, but his reaction has been rather typical among pseudo-progressives and social democrats all throughout modern history. Unsurprisingly, Papadimitriou also went on to say that Greeks, Spaniards and Italians live beyond their means, thereby displaying his obedience to the EU and IMF masters, and that one of the major comparative advantages that Greece now enjoys is that it is a country with “cheap labor.”

What has been happening in Greece may represent an extreme example because of the actual state of the economy, but it is quite representative of the state of politics of contemporary European Left. That is, a Left without political convictions and values, a Machiavellian Left that prefers to serve the Masters of Mankind than seek to reorganize society from below.

What is your explanation for the rise of Donald Trump, and do you actually see a future in “Trumpism”?

Understanding the phenomenon of Donald Trump demands that we look beyond the individual himself and, instead, into the way US society has evolved over the last few decades. Millions of Americans have seen their livelihoods either entirely collapse or be threatened by economic forces which they neither understand or control. For example, they (and Donald Trump) blame Mexico and China for the loss of American jobs, but no one is taking the trouble to point out to them that the bulk of the products that China, for example, exports to the United States are being produced by US or multinational corporations who opted to move their operations outside the US in order to take advantage of cheap labor opportunities. In the meantime, wages in the US have remained stagnant over the course of the last 25 years for the great majority of the population, while the economy has grown considerably. But the economic gains end up almost exclusively in the hands of a tiny corporate and financial elite, which also controls the political agenda.

“Trumpism” and disingenuous populism represent the future of American politics, especially since the economic policies that the Trump administration will implement will surely further deteriorate the state of inequality in this country and thus do nothing to ameliorate anger and anxiety about the future, which were the driving forces that sent so many people into Donald Trump’s arms.

Note: This interview has been condensed and edited for concision.

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What Is Participatory Economics? An Interview With Michael Albert



Photo: youtube.com

Participatory economics has long been proposed as an alternative to capitalism and centralized planning. It remains, nonetheless, a misunderstood concept and continues to find opposition among both capitalists and anticapitalists. So, what exactly is “participatory economics” and how does it fit with the socialist vision of a classless society? In this interview, Michael Albert, founder of *Z Magazine* and one of the leading advocates of the movement toward a “participatory society” addresses key questions about capitalism, socialism and the implications of a participatory economy.

C.J. Polychroniou: Any discussion of economic systems revolves essentially around

two apparently opposed poles — capitalism and socialism. In reality, however, most of the actually existing economies in the modern world have been “mixed economies.” Be that as it may, what’s your understanding of capitalism, and what are the distinguished features of socialism?

Michael Albert: Capitalism is an economic system in which people own workplaces and resources, employ workers for wages to produce outputs and overwhelmingly employ market allocation to mediate how the outputs are dispersed. Typically also, and I would say inevitably if it has the first two features, it will also have what I call a corporate division of labor in which about 80 percent of the workforce does overwhelmingly rote, obedient and mainly disempowering tasks, and the other 20 percent monopolizes empowering tasks. Income will be a function of property and bargaining power.

In my view, there are, therefore, three main classes in capitalism: a working class doing the disempowering work [whose members] have low income and nearly no influence; a capitalist class that employs workers, sells their product and tries to reap profits, and which, due to those profits, enjoys tremendous wealth and dominant power; and a coordinator class situated between the other two, doing the empowering work, and, due to that, having the power to accrue high income and substantial influence.

Socialism is trickier to pinpoint. For some it is an economy in which those who produce decide all the outcomes, so it is classless, or, if you like, has only one class, the workers, all of whom have the same overall economic status. For others, socialism is a society with a polity that greatly influences economic outcomes on behalf of the public, even while owners still reap profits. For still others, socialism is an economy that has public or state ownership plus central planning or markets for allocation.

I think this last is what socialism in practice has been, plus having a corporate division of labor that arises inexorably due to its forms of allocation but is also preferred, plus an authoritarian polity. However, I call this type of economy “coordinatorism” for the clear and obvious reason that its institutions eliminate capitalist ownership but elevate the 20 percent coordinator class to ruling status. Out with the old boss: the owner, the capitalist class; in with the new boss: managers, doctors, lawyers and so on, the coordinator class.

So, if you like socialism because you hope for classlessness, you are pretty likely

nowadays to have in mind some kind of worker-controlled economy but typically without offering clarification of what institutions can deliver that.

If you don't like the idea of full classlessness — either fearing that it would be dysfunctional or wishing to maintain coordinator class advantages — as socialism, you likely have in mind some variant on classical Marxist coordinatorist formulations.

I prefer classlessness — which, in my mind, is like preferring freedom to servitude — but I also see a need to have an institutional vision able to give it substance, which is what participatory economics, or if you prefer, participatory socialism tries to provide.

“Actually existing socialism” failed because, to a large extent, it was an authoritarian political system, the economy was guided from above, and social and cultural freedom was dictated from party apparatchiks. In your view, was this system salvageable, or was its downfall inevitable and necessary?

The latter, but I would like to clarify the picture just a bit.

I don't think “actually existing socialism” had an OK economy, for example, that was made unacceptable by a repressive or authoritarian state. I think “actually existing socialism,” or “20th-century socialism” or socialism as it is outlined in almost every serious scholarly presentation that goes beyond just positive adjectives, includes either markets (sometimes), or central planning (more often), a corporate division of labor, remuneration for output or bargaining power and some other less critical economic features. Then, in an actual country, it must, of course, also have an associated political system, kinship arrangements, cultural institutions and so on. And yes, those latter will all have to be at least compatible with the economic features or the society will be in turmoil, and one political arrangement strongly consistent with a central planning “actually existing socialism” model, is an authoritarian government.

So the best version of this socialism would be market allocation, public ownership and a parliamentary government. The worst version would be centrally planned allocation, state ownership and an authoritarian government or outright dictatorship. But again, the problem with the economics of both these options is not that it is neutral or good and only made bad by other institutions imposing. The economic aspects are intrinsically bad. They intrinsically elevate a coordinator class above workers, rather than generating classlessness.

In any contemporary discussions of alternative economic systems, there is

considerable emphasis on the need for participatory economics. What exactly is participatory economics, and does it fit under both capitalism and socialism?

Participatory economics proposes just a few key institutions for a new way of conducting economics. It starts with worker- and consumer-councils as decision-making bodies and elevates the idea that each participant in economic life should have a say over outcomes in proportion as they are affected by them — which it calls “self-management.”

It then proposes a new way to define jobs to generate a new division of labor, which is called “balanced job complexes.” This combines tasks into jobs so that each person working in the economy does a mix of tasks in their daily labors such that the “empowerment effect” of each worker’s situation is equal to that of every other worker’s situation, which eliminates the basis for a coordinator-class/working-class division.

Next, participatory economics proposes a new equitable basis for earning income. Instead of our incomes being determined by property ownership, bargaining power or even the value of our product, it should derive only from how hard we work, how long we work and the onerousness of the conditions under which we work at socially useful production.

And finally, participatory economics utilizes participatory planning instead of markets or central planning. Markets and central planning are horrendously destructive of equity, ecological sustainability, sociality and people’s ability and even inclination to control their own lives — and also entirely contrary to our other positive aims, noted above. In contrast, participatory planning is a process of collective negotiation of inputs and outputs in light of their full social, personal and ecological costs and benefits. The process has no center, no top, no bottom and conveys self-managing say to all participants. It literally augments rather than destroys solidarity, diversity, equity and collective self-management.

Of course, the above very condensed presentation of participatory economics isn’t enough to be compelling, nor does it address issues of attaining the goal, but perhaps it at least suggests that this alternative bears attention. There are many places online and in book-length presentations, videos and the like to look to see more, so one can more fully assess for oneself.

Does participatory economics support or undermine private property?

Of course, in a participatory economy, you would still own your shirt, and

countless other such items. Your phone is yours. Your violin is yours, and so on. But I assume you are referring to people owning means of production like natural resources, assembly lines, the tools used in workplaces and the workplaces themselves, and participatory economics doesn't really support or undermine that — it literally totally eliminates it.

Participatory economics institutions simply do not involve any of the aspects of private ownership of productive profits. There are no profits since income is only for duration, intensity and onerousness of socially valued labor. There is no personal control of asset use since decisions are made via collective self-management. If Joe actually had a deed to a workplace in a participatory economy, it would give Joe precisely zero returns — material, organizational or social — so, of course, such deeds will not exist.

What do you envision to be the role of the state under participatory economics?

There is a parallel vision, if you will, of participatory politics. Stephen Shalom and I are key proponents of this vision of a future polity operating alongside a participatory economy. This polity would still legislate laws for the population, adjudicate disputes, handle various kinds of security issues and deal with various “executive” matters of implementation. For example, it would oversee the Centers for Disease Control, since it would need some special executive powers not common to less governmental and solely economic institutions — but it would also operate like other workplaces, of course.

In each case, there would be major changes, not least due to having participatory economic relations in the structure of government institutions and in their purposes and agendas.

If you think of the economy and the polity — and kinship and culture too — as being like schools that impact the lives and views of their participants, it becomes clear why they must be compatible. It would be dysfunctional and disruptive to have the polity producing people with values, habits and expectations contrary to those which the economy they must engage with needs to operate, just as it would be dysfunctional and disruptive to have an economy producing people with values, habits and expectations contrary to what the polity they must engage with needs to operate.

It is not for us to decide future people's daily lives. It is for us to deliver to future people a set of institutions that let them make those decisions themselves.

Assuming that participatory economics is feasible and widespread within a given social formation, what model of democracy would be appropriate for this type of an economy?

Political participatory self-management, which is a set of nested assemblies (neighborhood, county, state and national) that become the primary seat of government legislative and executive decision-making. They are organized to deliver influence to individuals and constituencies in proportion as they are affected.

Workers' cooperatives are spreading in various parts of the world, with certain regions of Spain and Italy having developed rather extensive networks of cooperative enterprises. Are such developments consistent with the type of participatory economics that you advocate?

Yes, but there are also pitfalls possible. That is, when workers take over a plant, their act is potentially moving toward a participatory economic future. Even more so if they make their income policies equitable. Still more so, if they institute balanced job complexes. And finally, yet more so, if they start to override market pressures by negotiating just outcomes with other units and consumers.

On the other hand, if they retain the old corporate division of labor, then in time, a coordinator class will dominate outcomes and dissolve their other achievements. This points up the importance of institutional choices. What we want matters greatly, of course. But so do the arrangements we adopt. If we want classlessness, for example, but we adopt a corporate division of labor and/or markets or central planning, those choices will overcome our good intentions.

Does a desire to attain participatory economics in a participatory society have any implications for the present?

To win a new society, what we choose to do in the present has to lead toward what we want for the future: we must plant the seeds of the future in the present.

Wanting participatory economics means we want classlessness and we want some very specific defining institutions. Our own organizations should therefore reflect these desires, move us toward them and be consistent with arriving at them.

This is easier said than done. Sometimes we create a political institution with participatory intentions that then devolves toward authoritarian results. Or we develop a movement against capitalist profit-seeking, but we make it top-heavy with coordinator class leadership and values, and so we wind up not with

participatory economics, but with our movement either unravelling due to insufficient worker support (due to workers being alienated by the movement's coordinator bias) or with our movement winning a coordinatorist economy, but not participatory economics.

In each institution, we must ask: How should decisions be made? How should work be divided among participants? How should remuneration be organized? And how should the organization relate to other organizations? Participatory economics provides norms and aims for each of these choices.

One more point on this. If a particular set of aims becomes prominent on the left, this implies it will impact various decisions and choices in the present. When movements going into the late sixties became collectively explicitly committed to reducing and eliminating racism and sexism in society, it meant that movement organizations and projects could no longer have racist and sexist internal roles and allotments of tasks. This was, of course, positive but also no small implication and actually engendered considerable turmoil with established whites and men reticent, shall we say, about the changes, and the task isn't even fully resolved to this day.

My point is, the same kind of dynamic would follow from participatory economics becoming a shared guiding priority for movements. It would mean that movement organizations and projects could no longer have classist internal roles and allotments of tasks — but in this case, that would mean they would have to become collectively self-managing and have to have all participants able to fully contribute, which would in turn mean adopting balanced job complexes. But that transformation would mean people who currently dominate our projects and movements would have to become participants like all others, something they would not all welcome, partly for reasons of simple class interest trying to block a decline in personal income and influence, and partly sincerely believing that it would harm the projects.

So people who run left institutions have deep and powerful reasons to want to prevent participatory economics from becoming a widely shared aim since, if it did, that would lead in relatively rapid time to a kind of revolution within the left, not unlike the sexual and racial revolutions within the left, but this time about class — and not anti-owners, but about eliminating the class hierarchy between workers and coordinators, which would mean implementing balanced job

complexes. This dynamic within left media makes it hard for participatory economics to get a wide and serious hearing.

One final question: What type of economic policies do you think will be implemented by the Trump administration?

I think he actually probably does want to do major infrastructure overhaul, but, other than that, and as a higher priority, he wants to elevate corporate dominance of government policy even further than what already exists, and, most devastating, he wants to ignore and even worsen global warming and other similar potentially devastating ecological trends.

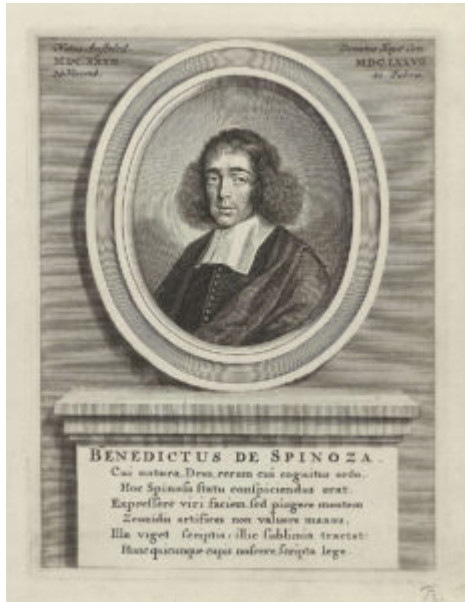
How successful this all is will depend, of course, on how unrelenting his opposition will prove to be. Progressives and radicals must amass the strongest and most sustained possible opposition across all relevant constituencies.

Note: This interview has been lightly edited for concision.

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The Spinoza Web



The Spinoza Web is a website that seeks to make the Dutch philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677) accessible to a wide range of users from interested novices to advanced scholars, and everything in between. It is a continually developing, active project whose success depends on its users. Please contact us with feedback, suggestions, and ideas!

At present our website offers two points of entry. The *'Timeline Experience'* tells the story of Spinoza, using rich graphic and other supporting material through which the user can navigate to enter and experience his very world. The *'Database Search'* is a gateway to an enormous repository for the study of Spinoza, whose goal is eventually to assemble all first-hand documentation pertaining to him. Attractively designed without compromising on scholarly standards, our website promotes a source-based contextual approach to Spinoza who, revered and reviled, has had countless rumours and myths attached to his name over the course of the centuries.

'Spinoza's web'-project

The Spinoza Web is a creation of the ['Spinoza's Web'](#)-project of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). It traces back to an early initiative of its main executive, [Jeroen van de Ven](#), and was implemented by the project's principal investigator, [Piet Steenbakkers](#), who had entertained a long-time wish for a website dedicated to Spinoza. In 2014 postdoctoral researcher [Albert Gootjes](#) joined their ranks in a largely advisory capacity. Later that year the team commissioned the Rotterdam-based advertising agency [Nijgh](#), which gladly welcomed the new challenge of combining creative inspiration with scholarly rigour.

Beta release

After extensive planning and user tests, November 2016 saw the beta release of The Spinoza Web, notably featuring the *'Timeline Experience'* and *Database* with

entries largely based on the historical and bibliographical research by Jeroen van de Ven. Subsequent releases are scheduled to boost the '*Database Search*' by making available in open access Spinoza's writings both in their original editions and in an authoritative English translation. Further plans include the addition of an interactive element facilitating Spinoza studies. To help us realize our pursuits, we welcome all contributions including but not limited to financial support. Potential contributors are encouraged to get in touch using the [Contact page](#).

See: <http://spinozaweb.org/>