

Medicare For All Rallies In 50 Cities Show Big Support For Universal Health Care



The United States is one of the richest countries in the world, yet its poverty rates are higher and its safety nets are far weaker than those of other industrialized nations. It is also the only large rich country without universal health care. In fact, as Noam Chomsky argued in *Truthout*, the U.S. health system is an “[international scandal](#).”

Why is the U.S. an outlier with regard to health care? What keeps the country from adopting a universal health care system, which most Americans have supported for many years now? And what exactly is Medicare for All? On the eve of scheduled [marches and rallies](#) in support of Medicare for All, led by various organizations such as the Sunrise Movement, Physicians for a National Health Program, the Democratic Socialists of America and concerned citizens throughout the country, the interview below with Peter S. Arno, a leading health expert, sheds light on some key questions about the state of health care in the United States.

Peter S. Arno is senior fellow and director of health policy research at the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and a senior fellow at the National Academy of Social Insurance. Among his many works is his Pulitzer Prize-nominated book, *Against the Odds: The Story of AIDS Drug Development, Politics & Profits*.

C.J. Polychroniou: U.S. health care is widely regarded as an outlier, with higher costs and worse outcomes than other countries. Why are health care expenditures in the U.S. significantly higher than those of other industrialized countries? And

how do we explain poor health outcomes, including life expectancy, compared to most European nations?

Peter Arno: The short answer as to why the U.S. has the highest health care expenditures in the world is simply that, unlike other developed countries, we exercise very few price constraints on our health care products and services, ranging from drugs, medical devices, physician and hospital services to private insurance products. On a broader level, the corporatization and profits generated from medical care may be the most distinguishing characteristics of the modern American health care system. The theology of the market, along with the strongly held mistaken belief that the problems of U.S. health care can be solved if only the market could be perfected, has effectively obstructed the development of a rational, efficient and humane national health care policy.

Despite the U.S.'s outsized spending on health care, its relatively poor health outcomes are beyond dispute. For example, in 2019, [the U.S. ranked 36th in the world in terms of life expectancy at birth](#) — behind Slovenia and Costa Rica, not to mention Canada, Japan and all the wealthy countries in Europe. This is not solely, as one might at first think, a function of [racial and ethnic health disparities](#), as dramatic as they are in the U.S. A recent [study](#) found that even white people living in the nation's highest-income counties often have worse health outcomes on infant mortality, maternal mortality, and deaths after heart attack, colon cancer and childhood leukemia than the average citizens of Norway, Denmark, and other wealthier countries.

The relatively poor health outcomes in the U.S. require a more nuanced explanation based on income, wealth and power inequalities. These factors drive inadequate and inequitable access to health care. But they also undermine many of the social determinants of health, particularly for poor and vulnerable populations, which fall largely outside the health care sector. These include, for example, higher income, access to healthy food, clean water and air, adequate housing, safe neighborhoods, etc.

Given the above facts, it's important to ask: Why doesn't the U.S. have universal health coverage?

The simple answer is that the economic and political forces that profit greatly from the status quo are opposed to universal health coverage. It's certainly not

too complicated to implement such a system — nearly every wealthy country in the world has figured out how it can be done. Many academics and pundits point to surveys indicating that Americans are fearful of change and are satisfied with the status quo, in particular with their employer-based health insurance (which covers more than 150 million workers and their families). In part, these attitudes are understandable. Most people are healthy and thus are not faced with the inequities and indignities that befall those who become ill and must deal with the private insurance industry and a dysfunctional health care system. Additionally, the true costs of health care are often hidden from workers who receive their insurance through jobs in which insurance premiums are automatically deducted from their paychecks. Even less well understood is the fact that we all [subsidize employers' contributions to workers' health insurance with more than \\$300 billion of our tax dollars](#) (employer contributions are not taxed but are considered a line item in the federal budget). But public sentiment is changing as [health care expenditures continue to outpace earnings](#). Over the past 10 years, insurance premiums have risen more than twice as fast as earnings, while deductibles rose more than six times as fast. And the even more rapidly rising price of prescription drugs has particularly captured the [public's attention](#). This is likely because [prescription drug prices rose by 33 percent](#) between 2014 and 2020, [and the average price of new cancer drugs now exceeds \\$100,000 per year](#). There is also an increasing public recognition of the massive and growing medical debt burden. One recent [study](#) estimated that nearly 1 out of 5 individuals in the U.S. collectively had \$140 billion worth of medical debt in collections in June 2020.

You have done outstanding research on the economics and politics of AIDS. How did your background in AIDS research shape your views on health care and social insurance?

My background in AIDS research, which began in the mid-1980s as the epidemic exploded around the country, highlighted a central weakness of American health care — if you become ill and lose your job, you frequently lose your health insurance. Thus, at the point when you need it most, you lose access to health care. This was driven by the private health insurance profit-maximizing model, the reliance on employment-based insurance and the lack of recognition of health care as a human right. The Affordable Care Act provided some mitigation but, with tens of millions uninsured today, these issues are still with us.

Another dimension of American health care that came into sharper focus for me was the sheer power of dominant stakeholders, such as the pharmaceutical companies, to extract profits with little restraint. The clearest example of this is perhaps the relentless increase in drug prices, which one could argue began when the first AIDS drug, AZT, was marketed at \$10,000 per year in 1987; today we have cancer drugs sold at more than 10 times that price.

Medicare for All is now gaining traction in the U.S. What exactly is Medicare for All and how would it work?

The term “Medicare for All,” as it is commonly known and described in congressional bills such as the Medicare for All Act of 2021 ([H.R. 1976](#), which currently has 117 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives), is a short-hand expression for a universal, single-payer health care system. Essentially, this means that health care will be provided to all U.S. residents and a single payer — the federal government — will pay all bills. The Act’s summary states in part:

Among other requirements, the program must (1) cover all U.S. residents; (2) provide for automatic enrollment of individuals upon birth or residency in the United States; and (3) cover items and services that are medically necessary or appropriate to maintain health or to diagnose, treat, or rehabilitate a health condition, including hospital services, prescription drugs, mental health and substance abuse treatment, dental and vision services, and long-term care.

The bill prohibits cost-sharing (e.g., deductibles, coinsurance, and copayments) and other charges for covered services. Additionally, private health insurers and employers may only offer coverage that is supplemental to, and not duplicative of, benefits provided under the program.

The “single payer” aspect of Medicare for All has several crucial virtues. First, it would do away with the thousands of private claim processes that currently exist to service the private insurance industry, thereby reducing an enormous amount of bureaucratic waste that is estimated to be in the [hundreds of billions of dollars](#) each year. At the same time, with the negotiating power given to the federal government, prices for pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and other medical expenditures could be brought under control. But most importantly, the single-payer approach is the most realistic approach to providing health care to all Americans.

Medicare for All marches and rallies are taking place in scores of cities across the country on Saturday, July 24. In fact, there is ample evidence that most Americans already support universal health care. But can we have health care reform without reforming the political system?

There is no doubt that the road to Medicare for All is an uphill struggle, given the array of political and economic forces that benefit from the status quo. However, the more than 50 marches and rallies around the country on July 24 reflect not only public support for transformative change in our health care system, but the type of movement building that is necessary to carry out this change. A complementary strategy, which could ignite a national consensus, would be a breakthrough success for a Medicare for All-type program at the state level, particularly in large states such as California or New York, where organizing efforts have been underway for several years. This could well have a cascading effect on other states and ultimately at the federal level. The common strategic thread for success at the state or federal level, is building a strong, popular social movement demanding universal health coverage for all.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, climate change, the political economy of the United States, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books, and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Arabic, Croatian, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books; *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change*, an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books (scheduled for publication in June 2021).

Chomsky: Bolsonaro Is Spreading Trump-Like Fear Of “Election Fraud” In Brazil



Noam Chomsky

Since 2019, Brazil finds itself in the midst of one of its most difficult periods since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, thanks to the inhumane policies of the Jair Bolsonaro regime which parallel those of Donald Trump’s administration. President Bolsonaro is an apologist for the brutal military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, and there is even the possibility that he may attempt to resort to the military guys who he thinks might back him up in the face of growing opposition to his handling of the pandemic.

Noam Chomsky has followed closely Brazilian and Latin American politics for many decades, and even visited Brazil’s former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in prison in 2018. In this interview, he discusses the factors that brought Bolsonaro to power, dissects his policies and compares them to the Trump regime, and assesses what the future may hold for the troubled nation.

C.J. Polychroniou: Jair Bolsonaro — an apologist for torture and dictatorship and part of the global trend towards authoritarianism that brought us Donald Trump — was sworn in as president of Brazil on January 1, 2019. Since that day, his administration has been pushing an agenda with disastrous consequences for democracy and the environment. I want to start by asking you of the conditions in

Brazil that brought Bolsonaro to power, a development which coincided with the end of the “pink tide” that had swept across Latin America in the early 2000s.

Noam Chomsky: A lot is uncertain and documentation is slim, but the way it looks to me is basically like this.

With the fall of commodity prices a few years after Lula da Silva left office in 2010, the Brazilian right wing — with U.S. encouragement, if not direct support — recognized an opportunity to return the country to their hands and to reverse the welfare and inclusiveness programs they despised. They proceeded to carry out a systematic “soft coup.” One step was impeaching Lula’s successor, Dilma Rousseff, in utterly corrupt and fraudulent proceedings. The next was to imprison Lula on corruption charges, preventing him from running in (and almost surely winning) the 2018 presidential election. That set the stage for Bolsonaro to be elected on a wave of an incredible campaign of lies, slanders and deceit that flooded the internet sites that most Brazilians use as a main source of “information.” There’s reason to suspect a significant U.S. hand.

The charges against Lula were withdrawn by the courts after they were completely discredited by Glenn Greenwald’s exposure of the shenanigans of the prosecution in connivance with “anti-corruption” (Car Wash) investigator Sergio Moro. Before the exposures, Moro had been appointed Minister of Justice and Public Security by Bolsonaro, perhaps a reward for his contributions to his election. Moro has largely disappeared from sight with the collapse of his image as the intrepid white knight who would save Brazil from corruption — while, probably not coincidentally, destroying major Brazilian businesses that were competitors to U.S. corporations (which are not exactly famous for their purity).

Though Moro’s targets were selective, much of what he revealed is credible — and not difficult to find in Latin America, where corruption is practically a way of life in the political and economic worlds. One can, however, debate whether it attains the level that is familiar in the West, where major financial institutions have been fined tens of billions of dollars, usually in settlements that avoid individual liability. One indication of what the scale might be was given by the London *Economist*, which found over 2000 corporate convictions from 2000-2014. That’s just “corporate America,” which has plenty of company elsewhere. Furthermore, the notion of “corruption” is deeply tainted by ideology. Much of the worst corruption is “legal,” as the legal system is designed under the heavy hand

of private power.

Despite Moro's own corruption, much of what he unearthed was real and had been for a long time. His main target, Lula's Workers Party (PT), it appears, did not break this pattern. Partly for this reason, the PT lost an opportunity to introduce the kinds of lasting progressive changes that are badly needed to undermine the rule of Brazil's rapacious and deeply racist traditional ruling classes.

Lula's programs were designed so as not to infringe seriously on elite power, but they were nonetheless barely tolerated in these circles. Their flaw was that they were oriented towards the needs of those suffering bitterly in this highly inegalitarian society. The basic character of Lula's programs was captured in a [2016 World Bank study](#) of Brazil, which described his time in office as a "golden decade" in Brazil's history. The Bank praised Lula's "success in reducing poverty and inequality and its ability to create jobs. Innovative and effective policies to reduce poverty and ensure the inclusion of previously excluded groups have lifted millions of people out of poverty." Furthermore, *Brazil has also been assuming global responsibilities. It has been successful in pursuing economic prosperity while protecting its unique natural patrimony. Brazil has become one of the most important emerging new donors, with extensive engagements particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, and a leading player in international climate negotiations. Brazil's development path over the past decade has shown that growth with shared prosperity, but balanced with respect for the environment, is possible. Brazilians are rightly proud of these internationally recognized achievements.*

Some Brazilians. Not those who consider it their right to wield power in their own interest.

Brazil became an effective voice for the Global South in international affairs, not a welcome development in the eyes of Western leaders, and a particular irritant to the Obama-Biden-Clinton administration when Brazil's foreign minister Celso Amorim came close to negotiating a settlement on Iran's nuclear programs, undercutting Washington's intent to run the show on its own terms.

The Bank report also concluded that with proper policies, the "golden decade" could have persisted after the collapse of commodity prices. That was not to be, however, as the soft coup proceeded. Some analysts have suggested that a crucial

turning point was when Dilma announced that profits from newly discovered offshore oil reserves would be directed to education and welfare instead of the eager hands of international investors.

The PT had failed to sink social roots, to such an extent that beneficiaries of its policies were often unaware of their source, attributing the benefits to God or to luck. The corruption, failure of mobilization and lack of structural reform all contributed to Bolsonaro's electoral victory.

Bolsonaro's victory was welcomed with enthusiasm by international capital and finance. They were particularly impressed by Bolsonaro's economic czar, ultra-loyal Chicago economist Paulo Guedes. His program was very simple: in his words, "Privatize Everything," a bonanza for foreign investors. They were, however, disillusioned as Brazil collapsed during the Bolsonaro years and Guedes's promises remained unfulfilled.

Let's talk now specifically about some of Bolsonaro's policies, which have been denounced by activists, economists and organizations such as Human Rights Watch, as well as by Indigenous leaders. And how would you compare his policies to those of Donald Trump?

The analogy is apt. Trump was Bolsonaro's unconcealed model, though not the only one. In casting his vote to impeach Dilma, he dedicated it to her torturer during the military dictatorship. That's a level of depravity that even his hero Trump didn't reach. His admiration for the dictatorship is also unconcealed, though he does have some criticisms of the military. His prime complaint is that they were too mild. They should have killed 30,000 people as the military did in Argentina next door. He has also criticized the behavior of the military in earlier years. They should have imitated the U.S. cavalry, which virtually eliminated the Native population. Instead, the Brazilian military left remnants in the Amazon. But Bolsonaro has made it quite clear that he intends to overcome that problem.

Like Trump, Bolsonaro's most important policy commitments, by far, are to destroy the prospects for organized human life in the interest of short-term profits for his friends — in his case, mining, agribusiness and illegal logging that have sharply accelerated the destruction of the Amazon forests. Scientists had anticipated, pre-Bolsonaro, that in a few decades, the Amazon would shift from one of the world's greatest carbon sinks to a carbon source, as it transitions from

tropical forest to savannah. Thanks to Bolsonaro, [that point may already be approaching](#). For Brazil, the effects will be devastating. Rainfall will sharply decline, with much of the rich agricultural land turning to desert. The world as a whole will suffer a severe blow, a wound that might prove to be lethal. For the Indigenous inhabitants of the forest, the outcome is genocidal.

As elsewhere in the world, the Indigenous in Brazil have been in the forefront for years in trying to protect human society from the depredations of “advanced civilization.” But time is growing short, and if the Trumps and Bolsonaros of the world are granted free rein, chances of decent survival are slim.

Again, as in the case of Trump, Bolsonaro’s malevolence is not exhausted by his commitment to destroy organized human society — along with the innumerable species that we are quickly driving to extinction. Like Trump, he can claim personal responsibility for tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of COVID deaths, to mention one salient contribution to the welfare of his country. Police killings, overwhelmingly with Black victims, have long been a plague, mounting under Bolsonaro. A particularly shocking recent incident of military assault on a Rio favela [reached international headlines](#).

All too easy to continue.

What is the likelihood that Bolsonaro could face charges in The Hague over the Amazon?

Virtually none. His contributions to global suicide may be particularly severe, but once that door is opened...

Who is going to allow that?

Brazilians took to the streets recently demanding the removal of Bolsonaro over his handling of the pandemic. Indeed, it seems that public opinion has finally turned overwhelmingly against Bolsonaro, and Lula is expected to trounce him in the 2022 elections. However, in a rather unsurprising manner, and reminiscent of his idol Trump, Bolsonaro announced just a few days ago that he may not accept the results of the 2022 election under the current voting system. How likely is the chance that the generals, on whom Bolsonaro has relied on from the first day he got into power, will stay the course and support an attempt of his to stay in power even if he loses next year’s presidential election?

Since 2018, Bolsonaro has been claiming that the only way he can be defeated in an election is by fraud. He's even claimed (of course, without evidence) that Dilma actually lost the 2014 election, which she won handily by over 3 million votes, mostly on sharp class lines, by historical standards a slim margin. He's now stepped up the rhetoric, preemptively charging the 2022 election with attempted fraud by his political enemies and telling a crowd of supporters a few weeks ago that, "Elections next year will be clean. Either we have clean elections in Brazil or we don't have elections" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 7-08-21).

Not exactly unfamiliar.

Right now, Lula is well ahead in the polls, just as in 2018, when measures were taken to bar his candidacy. There are legitimate concerns of a recurrence.

Parliamentary inquiries into the devastating mishandling of the pandemic by Bolsonaro's government are now reportedly reaching the military. The three branches of the armed services recently [released a statement](#) declaring that no inquiry that impugns the honor of the military will be tolerated.

There have been reports of steps that might be preparation for a military coup, perhaps modeled on the 1964 coup that installed the first of the vicious "National Security States" that terrorized the hemisphere for 20 years.

The pretext for overthrowing the mildly reformist Goulart government in 1964 was the ritual appeal to save the country from "Communism." Something similar could be concocted today.

How would Washington react? There are precedents that suggest an answer. One is 1964. The military coup that overthrew the parliamentary government was lauded by Kennedy-Johnson Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon as "the most decisive victory for freedom in the mid-twentieth century." As I discuss in [Year 501](#), it was a "democratic rebellion" that would help in "restraining left-wing excesses" and should "create a greatly improved climate for private investment" in the hands of the "democratic forces" now in charge. After 21 years of rule, Latin America scholar Stephen Rabe comments in *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, the "democratic forces" left the country in "the same category as the less developed African or Asian countries when it came to social welfare indices" (malnutrition, infant mortality, etc.), with conditions of inequality and suffering rarely matched elsewhere, but a grand success for foreign investors and domestic

privilege.

That's putting aside the "systematic use of torture" and other crimes of state documented by the Church-run Truth Commission during the dictatorship's last days.

We should also recall that the reaction to the Brazil coup — and possible involvement in it — was no exception. Rather, it was the norm after 1962, when JFK changed the mission of the Latin American military from anachronistic "hemispheric defense" to very live "internal security." The predictable results were described by Charles Maechling, who led U.S. counterinsurgency and internal defense planning from 1961 to 1966. Kennedy's 1962 decision, he wrote, shifted the U.S. stand from toleration "of the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military" to "direct complicity" in their crimes, to U.S. support for "the methods of Heinrich Himmler's extermination squads."

Those who might innocently believe that things have changed can turn to the Obama-Clinton reaction to the military coup in Honduras in 2009, overthrowing the mildly reformist Zelaya government. Their support for the coup, almost alone, helped turn Honduras into one of the murder capitals of the world, stimulating a flood of terrified refugees now cruelly and illegally turned back at the U.S. border, if they can make it that far through the barriers imposed by U.S. clients.

The rich and ugly record might suggest something about Washington's possible reaction to actions by the Brazilian military to "save the country from Communism."

Peruvians elected as their president last month Pedro Castillo, a teacher and labor union leader, but the far right opponent Keiko Fujimori and her supporters are refusing to accept the outcome by crying fraud, allegations which have been rejected by international observers and while both the European Union and the United States praised the conduct of the election. But in places like Chile and Colombia, the right is also under pressure by citizens fed up with neoliberalism. Is another "pink tide" in the making across South America?

In Chile, a remarkable popular uprising is seeking to free the country at last from the clutches of the Pinochet dictatorship, a criminal enterprise backed even more strongly than usual by the U.S., with particular enthusiasm by the "libertarians" who then turned to launching the global neoliberal assault of the past 40 years.

Colombia is being subjected to yet another renewal of the state and paramilitary violence escalated by Kennedy in 1962, when his military mission to Colombia, led by Marine Gen. William Yarborough, recommended “paramilitary sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents,” which “should be backed by the United States” — as it has been through many horrifying years, recently Clinton’s Plan Colombia.

There is turmoil and uncertainty throughout the hemisphere, including “the colossus of the North.” What happens here will, as always, have enormous impact.

Source:

<https://truthout.org/articles/chomsky-bolsonaro-is-spreading-trump-like-fear-of-election-fraud-in-brazil/>

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, climate change, the political economy of the United States, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout*’s Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books, and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Arabic, Croatian, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books; *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change*, an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books (scheduled for publication in June 2021).

An Interview With James Boyce: Agrarian Societies, Environmental Economics And Climate Change



C.J. Polychroniou interviews [Professor Emeritus James K. Boyce](#) about his career exploring agrarian societies,

environmental economics and climate change.

This is part of PERI's economist interview series, hosted by C.J. Polychroniou. *It was first posted [here](#).*

C.J. Polychroniou: How did your interest in economics come about, and why did you choose to pursue graduate studies at Oxford University after having completed your undergraduate degree at Yale?

James K. Boyce: Midway through my college years I worked for two years on a land reform and rural development project in the Indian state of Bihar. I had taken introductory economics in my freshman year, but it was in Bihar that I really began to learn and think about how economies function and malfunction.

On returning to Yale I designed an independent major in Agricultural Development that included some more courses in economics. More importantly, I met my life partner, Betsy Hartmann, who had just come back from working in India, too. After graduating we returned to South Asia and lived for about a year in a village in Bangladesh. Our aim was to write a book that would give readers a window into the lives and perspectives of some of the world's poorest people - an oral history of the present.

The book, *A Quiet Violence*, came out in 1983 after dozens of rejections from publishers. While we were completing it, we pieced together a living among other ways by teaching a Yale seminar on the political economy of world hunger. One book we used in the seminar was *The Political Economy of Agrarian Change* by Keith Griffin, an economist at Oxford. When I decided to go to grad school, I wrote to Keith and asked if he would consider working with me. He sent an encouraging reply, and that is the main reason I went to Oxford. It turned out to be a wonderful place to be. Keith was a splendid mentor, and I was also fortunate

to study with Amartya Sen, who introduced me to the deep normative questions of value and distribution that lie at the heart of economic theory. I could not have had better teachers.

CJP: Your early research centered around food and development policy for mainly agrarian societies. What lessons have we learned about agrarian reform and economic growth in developing countries?

JB: In my dissertation I analyzed agricultural growth in Bangladesh and the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal, the two halves of Bengal that were partitioned in 1947 when India and Pakistan became independent nations. My central thesis was that water control – irrigation, drainage, and flood control – is the “leading input” in Asian rice agriculture, and that Bengal’s agrarian structure posed formidable obstacles to resolving the attendant problems of coordinated water management and collective action. The self-interest of the larger landowners who dominated rural society often undermined possibilities for improving agricultural performance. It is an example of what is sometimes called the “inefficiency of inequality.”

After receiving my doctorate, I embarked on a book about the Philippine economy in the Marcos era. The Philippines was the birthplace of the so-called “green revolution” in Asian rice agriculture, the introduction of highly fertilizer-responsive varieties that allowed major increases in output. In that country, too, agrarian inequality acted as a brake on growth and on the extent to which the growth that did occur improved the lives of the poor.

The Philippine experience stands in marked contrast to that of South Korea, which was poorer than the Philippines at the end of World War Two. Today South Korea’s per capita income is about ten times greater than that of the Philippines, and income inequality is far lower. The superior performance of South Korea in both respects can be traced above all to the fact that the country implemented a serious land-to-the-tiller agrarian reform shortly after the war, whereas the Philippines did not and still has not.

Thoroughgoing land reform was a key distinguishing feature in the postwar economic trajectories of East Asian countries more generally. China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan shared this experience in common despite their diverse political circumstances. Land reform ended the fateful dichotomy between

ownership of the land and labor on it. In so doing, it unleashed broad-based growth not only in the agricultural sectors but in the economy as a whole.

CJP: Over the years your research interests have shifted towards environmental economics. Why did the political economy of the environment become such a major focus of your research?

JB: I've been interested in the environment for as long as I can remember. When I started graduate school, there was not a single course on environmental economics at Oxford. This was not unusual for the time. When a faculty member introduced a new course on the subject, I was the only student to show up. We turned this into a two-person study group, working our way through the classic works in the field. It was a rather short list.

I quickly saw connections between economic development and environmental economics. In both arenas, bringing a political-economy lens to bear – that is, asking about not only the size of the pie but also how it is sliced – could help to explain pervasive market failures and government failures. In both arenas, inequalities of power and wealth impede the coordinated action needed to resolve these failures. In both, the self-interest of those on top – those who extract rents from land and power and those who profit from environmentally degrading activities – leads to outcomes that are inefficient as well as inequitable.

When I joined the UMass economics faculty in 1985, the department did not have any courses in environmental economics. I launched a new undergraduate course called “the political economy of the environment.” It began with a couple dozen students, and over the years it grew into a larger lecture. Some years later, at the instigation of grad students, I started a graduate course of the same name.

When I had my first sabbatical in the early 1990s, I was a Fulbright scholar at the National University in Costa Rica. There I helped set up a master's program in ecological economics and sustainable development for students from across Central America and the Caribbean. This was when I wrote my first research paper on the political economy of the environment. It was called “Inequality as a Cause of Environmental Degradation,” and it was published in the journal *Ecological Economics* in 1994.

At around the same time, I also began working on the economics of violent

conflict and peacebuilding, another arena where large inequalities of wealth and power often lead to dreadful outcomes for the majority of people. I visited El Salvador soon after the signing of the peace accords that ended the country's long civil war. Soon thereafter the United Nations Development Program in San Salvador asked me to organize a study on the interface between economic policies and peace implementation. The resulting book, titled *Economic Policy for Building Peace*, led me onto work in other war-torn societies, including Bosnia, Guatemala, and Cambodia. Peacebuilding became another major focus for my research and writing.

In the past decade or so I have concentrated mostly on the environment. Climate destabilization in particular has become an urgent global issue, and my own country has been more part of the problem than part of the solution. Like many other Americans, I feel a sense of obligation to try to do something about it.

CJP: Environmental justice figures prominently in your analyses of climate change and climate policy. Why and how?

JB: Environmental justice (EJ) is about the distribution of environmental harms (and also the distribution of benefits from using and abusing the environment). In the 1980s pioneering research by Dr. Robert Bullard and others documented the fact that low-income communities and racial and ethnic minorities in the United States often bear disproportionate burdens from pollution and other environmental hazards.

EJ activists and researchers have helped to reframe environmental problems to ask not only what people do to nature but also what we do to each other. Environmental costs are not impersonal "externalities" that fall randomly across the populace; these costs are often inflicted on communities that are disadvantaged both politically and economically, that is, in terms of both political power and purchasing power. In the U.S. multivariate analyses have shown that race and ethnicity have major impacts on exposure to environmental harm that are independent of income.

Climate change and climate policy intersect with environmental justice in multiple ways. Let me highlight five here.

1. Differential vulnerability: Climate change affects everyone, but throughout the world it is low-income and politically disempowered communities that are at the

greatest risk. Many people live precariously close to the margin of survival where droughts, floods, and extreme heat waves can push them over the edge. They cannot afford private insurance, and typically they lack the political leverage to obtain insurance from the public sector. They often live in especially vulnerable settings, such as low-lying lands that are susceptible to storm surges. We saw these multiple factors clearly at work when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

2. Disproportionate impacts of co-pollutants: Fossil fuels are not only the main source of the carbon dioxide and methane emissions that are destabilizing the Earth's climate, but also the source of a slew of hazardous air pollutants that constitute a leading cause of premature mortality around the world. From an environmental justice standpoint, it is crucial that policies to reduce the use of fossil fuels take "co-pollutant" impacts into account and ensure that these are reduced first and foremost in the most vulnerable communities.

3. Carbon dividends: If the climate policy mix includes tight restrictions on the supply of fossil fuels allowed to enter the economy – and it must to guarantee that we achieve ambitious targets for emission reductions – this supply constraint will raise the price of fossil fuels, much as OPEC supply restrictions raised oil prices in years past. In many countries, including the U.S., higher fuel prices are tantamount to a regressive tax: as a percentage of expenditure (though not in absolute dollar terms) fuel price increases hit low-income households harder than middle class households, and the middle class harder than the rich. To offset this regressive impact and its political repercussions, a substantial share of the revenue from auctioning permits to bring fossil carbon into the economy (or, equivalently, from a carbon tax) can and I believe should be returned directly to the public as equal per person payments. This is something I've studied for a number of years, culminating in my 2019 book, *The Case for Carbon Dividends*. From the standpoint of environmental justice, the gifts of nature – in this case, the limited capacity of the biosphere to safely absorb carbon – are owned equally by all. Pollution should not be free even when it is legal. Those who make use of the limited capacity of our environment to safely dispose of wastes should pay for their use, and the proceeds should be shared by all as equal co-owners.

4. A just transition: Like all major transformations, the shift from the fossil fueled economy of the past to the clean energy economy of the future will result in winners and losers. The overwhelming majority of humankind, including future

generations, will benefit immeasurably. But in the course of the transition some people will incur costs. These include losses not only to fossil fuel firms and their shareholders, who can afford them, but also to workers and communities who have depended on the industry for their livelihoods. Policies to assist these workers and communities, many of whom have borne great sacrifices to provide our energy, is another dimension of environmental justice. A just transition also requires investing in the ecological restoration of landscapes that have been damaged by mountaintop removal, coal ash residues, oil spills and other toxic legacies of fossil fuel extraction and combustion.

5. Adjustment for whom? Tragically, the world's failure to respond more quickly and resolutely to the climate emergency means that we're already seeing its impacts and that they are sure to worsen in years ahead. Adjustment to climate change that we have failed to prevent will be a crucial challenge even as we move forward on mitigation. A key question is how the scarce resources available for adaptation – for building sea walls, establishing cooling centers to protect people during heat waves, protecting critical ecosystem functions and the like – will be allocated across competing needs and communities. From the standpoint of environmental justice, a bedrock principle is all lives are equally valuable and deserve equal protection. This is very different from prioritizing the lives and property of those who wield the most purchasing power or the most political influence.

These and other justice-centered policies can help to build a more egalitarian society in the course of climate change mitigation and adaptation. In turn, building a more egalitarian society will help to advance effective climate policy. The two go hand-in-hand.

CJP: You advocate carbon pricing policies as a means of reducing carbon dioxide and emissions of hazardous air pollutants into the air. Is there evidence that carbon pricing policies work for lowering global warming emissions?

JB: We know that price signals affect consumption and investment decisions. When the price of gasoline went up in the 1970s, for example, as a result of the supply restrictions imposed by OPEC and the Iran-Iraq war, consumers cut back their automobile use and began to demand more fuel-efficient vehicles. Businesses invested in energy efficiency. Governments – federal, state, and local – responded to the price incentive, too, by implementing policies to reduce their

use of oil.

Of course, a carbon price is not an end in itself. The end is to curb emissions along a path consistent with stabilizing the Earth's climate. The Paris Agreement's target of holding the rise in average surface temperatures to 1.5-2 °C above the pre-industrial level translates this goal into quantitative terms. Achieving this goal will require cutting emissions at something like 8% per year – if we start now – and even more quickly if we delay further.

Past carbon prices invariably have been too low, far too low, to achieve such steep reductions, even when they have been coupled with other climate policies like public investment and regulatory standards. Politicians routinely succumb to the temptation to err on the side of optimism, hoping that a modest carbon tax (alone or in combination with new regulations, more investment, and moral suasion) will suffice do the job. I would like to believe this too, but just because I hope it's true doesn't mean I think it necessarily is.

This is why I believe we must include in the climate policy mix a hard limit on the amount of fossil carbon that is allowed to enter the economy each year, a limit anchored to targeted reductions of, say, 8% per year. If other climate policies turn out to be adequate to meet this goal, that's great, the limit does not act as a binding constraint. But if they are not sufficient it becomes binding, and a limited number of permits (also known as allowances), up to the level set by the target, are issued to bring fossil carbon into the economy. I believe these permits should be auctioned to the energy firms, not given away free as under a cap-and-trade policy. Most, if not all, of the value of these permits will be passed on to consumers as higher fuel prices. We need to face up to this reality. And we need to face up to the impact that higher fuel prices will have on working families.

By recycling most or all of the revenue from permit auctions (or from a carbon tax) to the public as equal per person dividends, we can transform the regressive impact of the higher fuel prices into a progressive net impact. If the carbon dividends are delivered in manner that is fair, transparent, and visible (and not buried in the fine print of income taxes or electricity bills), they can help to sustain durable public support for the policy.

CJP: A growing number of environmentalists are adopting the position that economic growth is incompatible with environmental sustainability and any

sincere struggle to deal with the climate crisis, but you find this perspective to be flawed and perhaps unrealistic. Why? Can capitalism co-exist with a sustainable, equitable, and environmentally friendly economy?

JB: The first question is whether economic growth is compatible with environmental sustainability, above all climate stabilization. We know that national income (or GDP) is a deeply flawed measure of human well-being. As I wrote in the opening essay of my 2019 book *Economics for People and the Planet*, it is a combination of things that are good, bad, and useless. Anything that carries a price tag in the market gets counted as part of national income, no matter whether it's good (like food and housing), or bad (like the costs of pollution remediation and incarcerating people), or useless (like rat-race spending on "positional goods," a phenomenon described a century ago by the economist Thorstein Veblen). Meanwhile, things that are not exchanged in the marketplace, whether good (like unpaid child care) or bad (like environmental degradation) are not counted even though they can greatly affect human well-being.

If national income is an unsatisfactory measure of well-being, then by the same token the growth of national income ("economic growth") is an unsatisfactory measure of changes in human welfare. When environmentalists and their opponents argue about the "limits to growth," they're thinking about different things: environmentalists think about the bad stuff, while growth proponents think about the good stuff. When they assume that the good and bad are bound together, both sides repeat the mistake in national income measures: they fail to separate the good from the bad. I believe that we need a new banner: grow the good and shrink the bad. The clean energy transition is an example of doing precisely this.

Your second question is about capitalism. Like socialism, this is a word that carries a lot of baggage. If by capitalism you mean a world where wealth and power are concentrated in a narrow elite, then no, I don't think it's compatible with environmental sustainability or equity. But if you mean an economy where there are markets and private property, co-existing with other kinds of property and other institutions for resource allocation, then yes, I think it is. The same applies to different meanings of socialism.

The market-versus-state dichotomy that framed debates between the "right" and "left" in the 19th and 20th centuries turns out to have been off the mark. More

fundamental, and more decisive for the well-being of ordinary people, is the dichotomy between an oligarchic order in which wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a few and a democratic society in which they are broadly and equitably shared. This, to my mind, is the most important lesson we can draw from the tumultuous history of the 20th century.

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Radical Political Action Is Our Only Hope To Stop Criminal Negligence Of Climate Emergency



CJ

Polychroniou

It can be done. It must be done. For there is no tomorrow if we fail to decarbonize and thus rescue the planet from a climate catastrophe.

Planet Earth is on fire because of global warming, yet there are still untold

numbers of climate deniers in our midst, including over 130 elected officials in the U.S. Congress, and the global community's response to the climate crisis continues to be not merely unacceptably slow, but borders on criminal negligence.

Economic, political, and even psychological factors are at play as to why humanity refuses to move away from a "business-as-usual" approach when it comes to taking the drastic but ultimately necessary steps needed to tame global warming, which are none other than complete independence from fossil fuels. Yet, we must direct immediately all political energy towards this goal, otherwise complete climate collapse with apocalyptic consequences is inevitable and irreversible. We know the facts and have the know-how to save the planet. Indeed, human activities are destroying planet Earth, but political action can stop the destruction before it's all over.

The belief that human activity could change temperatures and somehow alter a local climate has been around since antiquity. Of course, ancient civilizations didn't know anything about climate science. We first learned about Earth's natural "greenhouse effect" sometime in the early 1820s, thanks to Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier, a French mathematician and physicist who was the first person to recognize that the Earth's atmosphere retains heat radiation. Then in the late 1850s the Irish scientist John Tyndall provided the explanation for the phenomenon of the "greenhouse effect" via his discovery that certain gases such as water vapor and carbon dioxide trap heat and warm the atmosphere. And in the late nineteenth century, the Swedish chemist/physicist Svante Arrhenius [discovered](#) that various human activities, including fossil fuel combustion, were contributing to the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Moreover, Arrhenius was able to determine through a numerical computation that the temperature in Europe could be lowered by between 4 and 5 degrees Celsius if the levels of carbon dioxide were cut in half, and inversely, if levels of carbon dioxide were to be increased by 50 percent, there would be a warming of between 5 and 6 degrees Celsius.

Still, climatology did not emerge into a major scientific enterprise until after World War II, and it was only in the 1950s when researchers began measuring carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, thanks to David Keeling, [a pioneer in modern climate science](#).

Indicative perhaps of how slow politics and societies in general react to scientific discoveries, the cause-and-effect relationship between the greenhouse effect and global warming does not emerge in public consciousness as a major issue—at least in the United States—until NASA scientist James Hansen’s [seminal testimony](#) in front of a U.S. Senate Committee on June 23, 1988. This was the first warning to the world at large that the age of global warming had arrived. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world’s most authoritative voice on climate crisis, was also created in 1988, which, incidentally, was the hottest year on record since the beginning of the century. Since the 1980s, each decade has been warmer than the previous one, [with 2020 being one of the hottest years on record](#). In fact, and while as of this writing the Pacific Midwest is experiencing an unprecedented heatwave, with hundreds of deaths, “there is a 90% likelihood of at least one year between 2021-2025 becoming the warmest on record,” [according](#) to the WMO Lead Centre for Annual-to Decadal Climate Prediction.

Yet, very little has been done since the late 1980s to combat global warming. The Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997 and entered into effect in 2005, was the first [legally binding agreement](#) (pdf) on the climate crisis. But the treaty had severe limitations. First, it applied only to industrialized countries, requiring them to reduce greenhouse gases on average by 5 percent below the 1990 levels from 2008 to 2012. Major emitters like China and India were left out, and the treaty was never ratified by the United States. The Kyoto Protocol was obviously inadequate in addressing global warming, but it was reservedly hailed as a “[reasonable first step](#)” (pdf), which was really another way of saying that climate crisis was a problem to be solved by future generations.

Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, [the Paris Agreement that was adopted by virtually every nation in 2015](#) seemed to offer greater hopes for combating global warming. The primary aim of the Paris Agreement is to limit global warming in this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. However, the treaty not only allows individual countries to determine themselves their preferred course of action for reducing greenhouse gases, but it is not even legally binding. In sum, it is a treaty for combating global warming without any teeth. Hardly surprising, therefore, that a recent Nationally Determined Contributions synthesis report [found](#) that “current levels of climate ambition are not on track to meet our Paris Agreement goals.” The report corroborates [the view](#) of Princeton University environmental scientist Michael Oppenheimer who

marked the progress made five years after the signing of the Paris Agreement in terms of the prospect of meeting a 2 degrees Celsius target with a grade of D or F.

The emissions reduction process is indeed moving at a very slow pace when we consider the fact that we need to reduce emissions to net zero by 2050 in order to avoid the worse possible effects of global warming. The Covid-19 pandemic did produce a relatively sharp decline, approximately by 5.8 percent, in global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. But this does not constitute a “[success story](#)” given that at some point more than half of the world economy had come to a forced standstill. Destroying economic activity is not the way to combat global warming. Moreover, as the pandemic experience has shown, even with more than half of the world economy in a lockdown, the reduction in carbon emissions was not as huge as one might have expected, and carbon emissions are now [again on the rise](#). Demand for oil has surged even in the midst of new worries about Covid-19, a development which stresses the point rather forcefully of [how addicted](#) the world remains to the fossil fuel economy.

Nonetheless, all is not yet lost. The Green New Deal is gaining traction as more and more people become aware of the way that global warming plunders the planet and affects their very own existence. Green parties across Europe are making huge gains in local, national, and European parliament elections, all while grassroots responses to the climate crisis are growing worldwide and climate lawsuits are [becoming a global trend](#) themselves. As a case in point, a Belgian court [ruled](#) recently that state authorities have shown negligence in tackling the climate crisis and “breached the European convention on human rights.” Germany’s highest court found that the country’s climate law is unconstitutional, a decision that has been heralded as a “[historic](#)” victory for youth. In the U.S. over fifty organizations have called for a [Green New Deal plan for Pacific Northwest Forests](#) as part of a response to the growing threat the climate crisis. And Robert Pollin, professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, has designed scores of commissioned state-level Green New Deals aiming towards a transition to a net-zero emissions economy.

But we are still at the beginning of the war against global warming and the fossil fuel economy and its allies. Powerful interests will continue to stand on the way to saving the planet as long as profits are to be made from any activities associated

with fossil fuels. This includes not only the fossil fuel industry itself, which has spent many billions of dollars so far in the U.S. alone opposing clean energy policies and even undermining climate science, but other corporate and financial entities such as banks. Governments too. We need greater public mobilization to exert influence on policymakers. We need many more Sunrise Movements, strong coalitions among civil rights groups, environmental groups, and progressive political forces, and intensification of campaigns and protests against investment in fossil fuels.

It can be done. It must be done. For there is no tomorrow if we fail to decarbonize and thus rescue the planet from a climate catastrophe. Humans are responsible for the impending climate apocalypse, but we also have the power to stop it. All it takes is true commitment and concerted action.

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The Differences Between Fascism And Trump(ism)



CJ

Polychroniou

Trump's policies were brutally neoliberal, racist, nativist, authoritarian, narcissistic — but fascist?

Donald Trump will go down in history as the president responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of Americans due to the criminal negligence in his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and for pushing the world closer to a precipice with his denialism of our climate crisis; yet, he may ultimately be best remembered for having decidedly transform American political culture with the theatricality of his proto-fascist politics.

Trump emerged on the political scene at a time of increasing contradictions in the American system of economic organization and distribution, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer, and growing divisions within society at large over race, ethnicity, and culture. While he had no previous political experience, his instincts told him that the route to power in a highly divided society was to double down on those divisions—a tactic that had been employed quite successfully in the past by various extreme political figures all over the world, including the likes of Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolph Hitler in Germany, respectively.

Indeed, Trump's stratagem of tapping into a huge reservoir of racism and nativism through the use of white identity politics and exploiting public discontent associated with America's economic decline through a standard repertoire of ultranationalist rants and transparent scapegoatism was key to his rise in power. Moreover, rather than aiming to unify a divided country while holding the nation's highest office, he continued to act more like the leader of a political party bent on cementing the ideological and cultural divisions in American society, all while implementing economic policies that would lead to further inequality and the expansion of the power of the plutocracy.

Trump's transformation of American political culture consisted in the unleashing of dangerous forces—arch-enemies of the open and diverse society—that posed an internal threat to liberal democracy. His refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 election, and subsequent attempts by him and his allies to overturn the election, was indeed the culmination of four years of proto-fascist political rhetoric and authoritarian grandstanding.

Subsequently, Trump's politics has led many to conclude that the alleged billionaire entrepreneur is a fascist and that the United States was actually on the

verge of becoming a fascist country during his four-year tenure in power. It is a belief that continues to hold sway over the minds of many progressives, especially since the GOP is officially now Trump's party and Republicans are fighting as dirty as they can to return to power, with or without Trump at the helm.

However, as I will argue below, and without any intention of downplaying the dangers that Trump and Trumpism represent for a dysfunctional democracy like the one that prevails in the United States, this is a belief based on a misunderstanding of fascism both as a movement and as a regime. Fascism has specific politico-economic properties, even though there are some subtle differences between Italian fascism, German Nazism, and Spanish Francoism, and is defined by a unique philosophical worldview regarding the relationship between state and individual. Fascism is an extreme right-wing authoritarian form of government, but not all authoritarian governments qualify as fascist, and the term in connection with Trump is quite misleading. In fact, hardly any expert on [fascism](#) thinks that what Trump practiced fits with the political ideology behind fascism.

The differences between fascism and Trump(ism) are quite striking. Trump and the political movement that he created do share certain traits with fascism, such as reliance on hate, fear, and conspiracy theories, along with the rejection of reason, to deepen social divisions and to create a sense of an imminent collapse as part of a strategy whose aim is to change the political environment by bringing about a change in the existing balance of social forces. But these are tactics that have been widely used by authoritarian leaders and extreme populist movements throughout the modern era of politics. Moreover, while the characterizations of Trump as an authoritarian figure with an utterly narcissistic personality or as a dangerous con artist who manipulates people to believe in lies and "alternative facts" are totally, unmistakably true, the orange maniac is not an ideologue by any stretch of the imagination; instead, he will gladly say whatever he feels is necessary to please his base.

What is fascism?

First, fascism represents one form of "exceptional capitalist state," as the Marxist political sociologist Nicos Poulantzas had argued, and reflects the breakdown of social order as a result of a severe capitalist crisis and the ensuing confrontation between different classes and ideological groups for political hegemony.

Fascism emerged in Europe during the interwar years (1919-1939) and was first established in Italy under Benito Mussolini (1922-1945) and then in Germany under Adolph Hitler (1933-1945). Italian fascism and German National Socialism represent “classical fascism” and rest on similar belief systems and regime properties, with one possible exception: the “biological” state did not figure as prominently in Italian fascism as it did under the Third Reich.

Fascism relies on paramilitary squads to spread terror and pursues relentless raids against socialists, communists, and other arch-enemies of fascism. This was typical of the role of Mussolini’s paramilitary squads, known as the “blackshirts,” whose activities covered all regions of the country, including the peninsula and the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and constituted an integral component of the fascism’s march to power and the establishment of a dictatorship.

The Nazi rise to power followed a similar path. In 1921, Hitler formed the paramilitary organization Sturm Abteilung (SA), more commonly known as the “brownshirts.” The purpose of the “Sturm Unit” was none other than to intimidate political opponents. In 1925, Hitler established a sub-division of the SA, the Schutzstaffel (German for “Protective Echelon”), otherwise known as the SS, which served as Hitler’s personal bodyguards. The SS, Hitler’s “master race,” would eventually see its role and size expanded dramatically after 1929 when Heinrich Himmler was put in charge. By the start of World War II, the SS consisted of more than 250,000 members that had a hand on virtually all major Nazi activities, including running concentration camps.

Unless I am mistaken, there were no signs of “blackshirts” or “brownshirts” engaging in thuggish vigilantism before Trump’s rise to power.

Fascist political ideology is also unmistakably unique. Fascism strips away individual rights and glorifies the state. The organic state is typified by the fascist regime, which assigns the state complete control over every aspect of national life. For Giovanni Gentile, the philosopher and political theorist of Italian fascism, “state and individual are one,” while “the authority of the state is not subject to negotiation, or compromise, or to divide its terrain with other moral or religious principles that might interfere in consciousness.”

Fascism bans political opposition, ends constitutional rule, enforces censorship, and imprisons political opponents.

Indeed, as Benito Mussolini's own formulation of fascism has it, "Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State."

It is worth quoting at length the fascist conception of the state, as articulated once again [by Mussolini himself](#):

Anti-individualistic, the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal, will of man as a historic entity. It is opposed to classical liberalism which arose as a reaction to absolutism and exhausted its historical function when the State became the expression of the conscience and will of the people. Liberalism denied the State in the name of the individual; Fascism reasserts.

Totalitarianism and state terrorism are defining attributes of fascism. Trump's administration, horrific as it was, exhibited no such features.

There are also striking differences between fascism and Trump(ism) when it comes to the economy.

Fascists do not oppose private property but believe in taming capitalism by forming a specific relationship between state and big business or monopoly capital, with the state having the upper hand. Mussolini identified the economics of fascism as "state capitalism." Fascism also intervenes in the overall workings of the economy through coordinated actions of some central planning board to attain a set of "fixed objectives," even if those actions tended at times to involve "dis-organic intervention," as Mussolini himself had once complained. Fascism also controls the monetary system, sets prices, and promotes large government projects and all sorts of public works as part of the pursuit of its alleged "full-employment" economy. Hitler's autobahn construction (though plans for the autobahn date to the 1920s and construction had actually begun before Hitler came to power) was undertaken under that pretext. Nonetheless, it was rearmament that helped the Nazis achieve economic recovery in the 1930s.

Trump's economic policies, on the other hand, were brutally neoliberal in origin and scope. The war alone that his administration launched on regulations clearly testifies to Trump's commitment to free-market fundamentalism. As far as his opposition to "free trade" is concerned, it was initiated by his belief that other countries were bending the rules at the expense of the United States, not because

he was in principle against the idea of “free trade.”

Trump’s policies sought to enhance even further the power of the plutocracy in the United States. And he accomplished this through the pursuit of extreme neoliberal policies, not through a corporatist model. On the other hand, to keep his fanatical base loyal, he employed a standard repertoire of proto-fascist rhetoric and challenged as far as he could the foundations of liberal democracy, which, according to his followers, had set rules that cater to the whims of the “detestable elite.”

In this manner, Trump was not alone. Virtually all authoritarian political figures out there today (Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, Bolsonaro in Brazil, to name just a few) use similar tactics, exploit the vulnerabilities in the political culture in which they operate and exhibit disdain for the rule of law. Do they all, with Trump together, belong to the fascist camp? Not unless the aim is to reduce fascism to a meaningless political ideology and forget the sickening atrocities committed by fascist regimes in the most murderous century in recorded history.

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



Noam Chomsky

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

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

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

underway?

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

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

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

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

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

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

By the '70s, beginning with Nixon's overtly racist "Southern strategy," the Republicans began their journey off the political spectrum, culminating (so far) in the McConnell-Trump era of contempt for democracy as an impediment to holding

uncontested power. Meanwhile, the Democrats abandoned the working class, handing working people over to their class enemy. The Democrats transitioned to a party of affluent professionals and Wall Street, becoming “cool” under Obama in a kind of replay of the infatuation of liberal intellectuals with the Camelot image contrived in the Kennedy years.

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, Republicans claim to be the party of the working class, thanks to their advocacy of lots of guns for everyone, Christian nationalism and white supremacy

— our “traditional way of life.”

To Biden’s credit, he has made moves to reverse the abandonment of working people by his party, but in the “debased state” of what remains of American democracy, it’s a tough call.

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

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

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

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

We might tarry a moment to think about this. The most recent general assessment of where we stand comes from a leaked draft of the forthcoming [IPCC study](#) on the state of the environment. According to the report of the study, it “concludes

that climate change will fundamentally reshape life on Earth in the coming decades, even if humans can tame planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions. Species extinction, more widespread disease, unlivable heat, ecosystem collapse, cities menaced by rising seas — these and other devastating climate impacts are accelerating and bound to become painfully obvious before a child born today turns 30.... On current trends, we're heading for three degrees Celsius at best."

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

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

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

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

It is useful to recall that the primary intellectual forces behind the neoliberal assault have a long history of support for fascism. Just a few years before the assault was launched, they had conducted an experiment in neoliberal socio-economic management under the aegis of the Pinochet dictatorship, which prepared the ground by destroying labor and dispatching critics to hideous

torture chambers or instant death. Under near-perfect experimental conditions, they managed to crash the economy in a few years, but no matter. On to greater heights: imposing the doctrine on the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cruelty of Republican governors who refuse federal aid to provide desperate people even with meager Medicaid assistance.

That's one way to expand the base, which could have large effects if it can break through Republican opposition and the reluctance of the more right-wing sectors of the Democratic Party (termed "moderate" in media discourse). It could bring back to the Democratic fold the working-class voters who left in disgust with Obama's betrayals, and further back, with the Democrats' abandonment of working people since the reshaping of the party from the '70s.

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

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

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

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

Many Democrats wish to eliminate the filibuster — another Jim Crow relic — because with the wafer-thin majority that they hold it is impossible to pass into

law landmark pieces of legislation. However, given today's political climate, and with the possibility looming on the horizon that Trumpist Republicans will retake the House in 2022, aren't there risks in abolishing the filibuster?

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

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

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

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

The call for plutocracy was not concealed. Madison's vision, largely enacted, was that the new government should "protect the minority of the opulent against the majority." Many devices were introduced to ensure this outcome. Primary power

was placed in the (unelected) Senate, with long terms to insulate Senators from public pressure.

“The senate ought to come from and represent the wealth of the nation,” Madison held, backed by his colleagues. These are the “more capable set of men,” who sympathize with property owners and their rights. In simple words, “those who own the country ought to govern it,” as explained by John Jay, First Justice of the Supreme Court. In short, plutocracy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Source: <https://truthout.org/noam-chomsky>

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