

Chomsky And Pollin: We Can't Rely On Private Sector For Necessary Climate Action



Noam Chomsky

The new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) climate assessment report, released on August 9, has finally stated in the most absolute terms that anthropogenic emissions are the cause behind global warming, and that we have no time left in the effort to keep temperature from crossing the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold. If we fail to take immediate action, we can easily exceed 2 degrees Celsius by the middle of the century.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that while the IPCC report underscores the point that the planet is warming faster than expected, it does not directly mention fossil fuels and puts emphasis on carbon removal as a necessary means to tame global warming even though such technologies are still in their infancy.

In this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, Noam Chomsky, one of the world's greatest scholars and leading activists, and Robert Pollin, a world-leading progressive economist, offer their own assessments of the IPCC report. Chomsky and Pollin are co-authors of *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (Verso, 2020).

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the new IPCC climate assessment report, which deals with the physical science basis of global warming, comes in the midst of extreme heat waves and devastating fires taking place both in the U.S. and in many parts around the world. In many ways, it reinforces what we already know about the

climate crisis, so I would like to know your own thoughts about its significance and whether the parties that have “approved” it will take the necessary measures to avoid a climate catastrophe, since we basically have zero years left to do so.

Noam Chomsky: The IPCC report was sobering. Much, as you say, reinforces what we knew, but for me at least, shifts of emphasis were deeply disturbing. That’s particularly true of the section on carbon removal. Instead of giving my own nonexpert reading, I’ll quote the *MIT Technology Review*, under the heading “[The UN climate report pins hopes on carbon removal technologies that barely exist.](#)”

The IPCC report

offered a stark reminder that removing massive amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere will be essential to prevent the gravest dangers of global warming. But it also underscored that the necessary technologies barely exist — and will be tremendously difficult to deploy.... How much hotter it gets, however, will depend on how rapidly we cut emissions and how quickly we scale up ways of sucking carbon dioxide out of the air.

If that’s correct, and I see no reason to doubt it, hopes for a tolerable world depend on technologies that “barely exist — and will be tremendously difficult to deploy.” To confront this awesome challenge is a task for a coordinated international effort, well beyond the scale of John F. Kennedy’s mission to the moon (whatever one thinks of that), and vastly more significant. To leave the task to private power is a likely recipe for disaster, for many reasons, including one brought up by *The New York Times* [report on the idea](#): “there are risks: The very idea could offer industry an excuse to maintain dangerous habits ... some experts warn that they could hide behind the uncertain promise of removing carbon later to avoid cutting emissions deeply today.” The greenwashing that is a constant ruse.

The significance of the IPCC report is beyond reasonable doubt. As to whether the necessary measures will be taken? That’s up to us. We can have no faith in structures of power and what they will do unless pressed hard by an informed public that prefers survival to short-term gain for the “masters of the universe.”

The immediate U.S. government reaction to the IPCC report was hardly encouraging. President Joe Biden sent his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, to censure the main oil-producing countries (OPEC) for not raising oil production

high enough. The message was captured in a headline in the London *Financial Times*: "[Biden to OPEC: Drill, Baby, Drill.](#)"

Biden was sharply criticized by the right wing here for calling on OPEC to destroy life on Earth. MAGA principles demand that U.S. producers should have priority in this worthy endeavor.

Bob, what's your own take on the IPCC climate assessment report, and do you find anything in it that surprises you?



Robert Pollin - Photo: UMass Amherst

Robert Pollin: In total, the IPCC's [Sixth Assessment Report](#) on the physical basis of climate change is 3,949 pages long. So there's a whole lot to take in, and I can't claim to have done more than initially review the 42-page "Summary for Policymakers." Two things stand out from my initial review. These are, first, the IPCC's conclusion that the climate crisis is rapidly become more severe and, second, that their call for undertaking fundamental action has become increasingly urgent, even relative to their own 2018 report, "[Global Warming of 1.50C.](#)" It is important to note that this hasn't always been the pattern with the IPCC. Thus, in its 2014 [Fifth Assessment Report](#), the IPCC was significantly more sanguine about the state of play relative to its 2007 [Fourth Assessment Report](#). In 2014, they were focused on a goal of stabilizing the global average temperature at 2.0 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, rather than the 1.5 degrees figure. As of 2014, the IPCC had not been convinced that the 1.5 degrees target was imperative for having any reasonable chance of limiting the most severe impacts of climate change in terms of heat extremes, floods, droughts, sea level rises and biodiversity losses. The 2014 report concluded that reducing global CO2 emissions by only 36 percent as of 2050 could possibly be sufficient to move onto

a viable stabilization path. In this most recent report, there is no equivocation that hitting the 1.5 degrees target is imperative, and that to have any chance of achieving this goal, global CO2 emissions must be at zero by 2050.

This new report does also make clear just how difficult it will be to hit the zero emissions target, and thus to remain within the 1.5 degrees of warming threshold. But it also recognizes that a viable stabilization path is still possible, if just barely. There is no question as to what the first and most important single action has to be, which is to stop burning oil, coal and natural gas to produce energy. Carbon-removal technologies will likely be needed as part of the overall stabilization program. But we should note here that there are already two carbon-removal technologies that operate quite effectively. These are: 1) to stop destroying forests, since trees absorb CO2; and 2) to supplant corporate industrial practices with organic and regenerative agriculture. Corporate agricultural practices emit CO2 and other greenhouses gases, especially through the heavy use of nitrogen fertilizer, while, through organic and regenerative agriculture, the soil absorbs CO2. That said, if we don't stop burning fossil fuels to produce energy, then there is simply no chance of moving onto a stabilization path, no matter what else is accomplished in the area of carbon-removal technologies.

I would add here that the main technologies for building a zero-emissions economy — in the areas of energy efficiency and clean renewable energy sources — are already fully available to us. Investing in energy efficiency — through, for example, expanding the supply of electric cars and public transportation systems, and replacing old heating and cooling systems with electric heat pumps — will save money, by definition, for all energy consumers. Moreover, on average, the cost of producing electricity through both solar and wind energy is already, at present, [about half](#) that of burning coal combined with carbon capture technology. At this point, it is a matter of undertaking the investments at scale to build the clean energy infrastructure along with providing for a fair transition for the workers and communities who will be negatively impacted by the phase-out of fossil fuels.

The evidence is clear that human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide are behind global warming, and that warming, according to the IPCC report, is taking place faster than predicted. Most likely because of the latter, the Sixth Assessment report provides a detailed regional assessment of climate change, and (for the

first time, I believe) includes a chapter on innovation and technology, with emphasis on carbon-removal technologies, which Noam, coincidentally, found “deeply disturbing.” As one of the leading advocates of a Global Green New Deal, do you see a problem if regional climate and energy plans became the main frameworks, at least in the immediate future, for dealing with the climate emergency?

Pollin: In principle, I don’t see anything wrong with regional climate and energy plans, as long as they are all seriously focused on achieving the zero emissions goal and are advanced in coordination with other regions. The big question, therefore, is whether any given regional program is adequate to the requirements for climate stabilization. The answer, thus far, is “no.” We can see this in terms of the climate programs in place for the U.S., the European Union and China. These are the three most important regions in addressing climate change for the simple reason that these three areas are responsible for generating 54 percent of all global CO2 emissions — with China at 30 percent, the U.S. at 15 percent and the EU at 9 percent.

In the U.S., the Biden administration is, of course, a vast improvement relative to the four disastrous years under Trump. Soon after taking office, Biden set out emissions reduction targets in line with the IPCC, i.e., a 50 percent reduction by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. Moreover, the American Jobs Plan that Biden introduced in March would have allocated about \$130 billion per year in investments that would advance a clean energy infrastructure that would supplant our current fossil fuel-dominant system.

This level of federal funding for climate stabilization would be unprecedented for the U.S. At the same time, it would provide maybe 25 percent of the total funding necessary for achieving the administration’s own emission reduction targets. Most of the other 75 percent would therefore have to come from private investors. Yet it is not realistic that private businesses will mount this level of investment in a clean energy economy — at about \$400 billion per year — unless they are forced to by stringent government regulations. One such regulation could be a mandate for electric utilities to reduce CO2 emissions by, say, 5 percent per year, or face criminal liability. The Biden administration has not proposed any such regulations to date. Moreover, with the debates in Congress over the Biden bill ongoing, the odds are long that the amount of federal government funding provided for climate stabilization will even come close to the

\$130 billion per year that Biden had initially proposed in March.

The story is similar in the EU. In terms of its stated commitments, the European Union is advancing the world's most ambitious climate stabilization program, what it has termed the European Green Deal. Under the European Green Deal, the region has pledged to reduce emissions by at least 55 percent as of 2030 relative to 1990 levels, a more ambitious target than the 45 percent reduction set by the IPCC. The European Green Deal then aligns with the IPCC's longer-term target of achieving a net zero economy as of 2050.

Beginning in December 2019, the European Commission has been enacting measures and introducing further proposals to achieve the region's emission reduction targets. The most recent measure to have been adopted, this past June, is the NextGenerationEU Recovery Plan, through which €600 billion will be allocated toward financing the [European Green Deal](#). In July, the European Commission followed up on this spending commitment by outlining 13 tax and regulatory measures to complement the spending program.

But here's the simple budgetary math: The €600 billion allocated over seven years through the NextGenerationEU Recovery Plan would amount to an average of about €85 billion per year. This is equal to less than 0.6 percent of EU GDP over this period, when a spending level in the range of 2 to 3 percent of GDP will be needed. As with the U.S., the EU cannot count on mobilizing the remaining 75 percent of funding necessary unless it also enacts stringent regulations on burning fossil fuels. If such regulations are to have teeth, they will mean a sharp increase in what consumers will pay for fossil fuel energy. To prevent all but the wealthy from then experiencing a significant increase in their cost of living, the fossil fuel price increases will have to be matched by rebates. The 2018 Yellow Vest Movement in France emerged precisely in opposition to President Emmanuel Macron's proposal to enact a carbon tax without including substantial rebates for nonaffluent people.

The Chinese situation is distinct from those in the U.S. and EU. In particular, China has not committed to achieving the IPCC's emission reduction targets for 2030 or 2050. Rather, as of a September 2020 United Nations General Assembly address by President Xi Jinping, China committed to a less ambitious set of targets: emissions will continue to rise until they peak in 2030 and then begin declining. Xi also committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2060, a decade

later than the IPCC's 2050 target.

We do need to recognize that China has made major advances in support of climate stabilization. As one critical case in point, China's ambitious industrial policies are primarily responsible for driving down the costs of solar energy worldwide by 80 percent over the past decade. China has also been the leading supplier of credit to support clean energy investments in developing economies. Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that if China sticks to its stated emission reduction plans, there is no chance whatsoever of achieving the IPCC's targets.

In short, for different reasons, China, the U.S. and the EU all need to mount significantly more ambitious regional climate stabilization programs. In particular, these economies need to commit higher levels of public investment to the global clean energy investment project.

The basic constraint with increasing public investment is that people don't want to pay higher taxes. Rich people can, of course, easily afford to pay higher taxes, after enjoying massive increases in their wealth and income under neoliberalism. That said, it is still also true that most of the funds needed to bring global clean energy investments to scale can be made available without raising taxes, by channeling resources from three sources: 1) transferring funds out of military budgets; 2) converting all fossil fuel subsidies into clean energy subsidies; and 3) mounting large-scale green bond purchasing programs by the U.S. Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank and the People's Bank of China. Such measures can be the foundation for tying together the U.S., EU and Chinese regional programs that could, in combination, have a chance of meeting the urgent requirements for a viable global climate stabilization project.

Noam, I [argued recently](#) that we should face the global warming threat as the outbreak of a world war. Is this a fair analogy?

Chomsky: Not quite. A world war would leave survivors, scattered and miserable remnants. Over time, they could reconstruct some form of viable existence. Destruction of the environment is much more serious. There is no return.

Twenty years ago, I wrote a book that opened with biologist Ernst Mayr's rather plausible argument that we are unlikely to discover intelligence in the universe. To carry his argument further, if higher intelligence ever appears, it will probably

find a way to self-destruct, as we seem to be bent on demonstrating.

The book closed with Bertrand Russell's thoughts on whether there will ever be peace on Earth: "After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it has generated Neros, Genghis Khans, and Hitlers. This, however, I believe is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return."

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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