

Chomsky: We Must Not Let Masters Of Capital Define The Post-COVID World



Noam Chomsky

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has many thinking that a new economic and political order is inevitably under way. But is that so? In the U.S., the moneyed class, which has thrived under Donald Trump, won't go down without pulling all stops to make sure that popular pressures for radical reforms will be blocked, says world-renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky. Chomsky also reminds us that overt racism has intensified under Trump, and that police violence is a symptom of the underlying white supremacy that plagues U.S. society. Meanwhile, Trump's anti-environmental policies and his trashing of arms control treaties are bringing the world ever closer to an environmental and nuclear holocaust.

C.J. Polychroniou: It's been argued by many, from various quarters, that COVID-19 has been a game changer. Do you concur with this view, or are we talking of a temporary situation, with a return to the "business as usual" approach being the most likely scenario once this health crisis is over?

Noam Chomsky: There is no way to predict. Those who have primary responsibility for the multiple crises that imperil us today are hard at work, relentlessly, to ensure that the system they created, and from which they have greatly benefited, will endure — and in an even harsher form, with more intense surveillance and other means of coercion and control. Popular forces are

mobilizing to counter these malign developments. They seek to dismantle the destructive policies that have led us to this uniquely perilous moment of human history, and to move toward a world system that gives priority to human rights and needs, not the prerogatives of concentrated capital.

We should take a few moments to clarify to ourselves the stakes in the bitter class war that is taking shape as the post-pandemic world is being forged. The stakes are immense. All are rooted in the suicidal logic of unregulated capitalism, and at a deeper level in its very nature, all becoming more apparent during the neoliberal plague of the past 40 years. The crises have been exacerbated by malignancies that have surfaced as these destructive tendencies took their course. The most ominous are appearing in the most powerful state in human history — not a good omen for a world in crisis.

The stakes were spelled out in the setting of the [Doomsday Clock](#) last January. Each year of Trump's presidency, the minute hand has been moved closer to midnight. Two years ago, it reached the closest it has been since the Clock was first set after the atomic bombings. This past January, the analysts abandoned minutes altogether and moved to seconds: 100 seconds to midnight. They reiterated the prime concerns: nuclear war, environmental destruction and deterioration of democracy, the last of these because the only hope of dealing with the two existential crises is vibrant democracy in which an informed population is directly engaged in determining the fate of the world.

Since January, Trump has escalated each of these threats to survival. He has continued his project of dismantling the arms control regime that has provided some protection against nuclear disaster. So far this year, he has terminated the Open Skies Treaty, proposed by Eisenhower, and imposed frivolous conditions to block the re-negotiation of New Start, the last pillar of the system. He is now considering ending the moratorium on nuclear tests, "an invitation for other nuclear-armed countries to follow suit," [said Daryl Kimball](#), executive director of the Arms Control Association.

The military industry can scarcely control its euphoria over the flood of gifts from the public to develop new weapons to destroy us all, encouraging adversaries to do likewise so that down the road, new grants will flow to try to counter the new threats to survival. A hopeless task, as virtually every specialist knows, but that is not pertinent; what matters is that public largesse should flow into the right

pockets.

Trump also has continued his dedicated campaign to destroy the environment that sustains human life. His FY 2020 budget proposal, issued while the pandemic was raging, called for further defunding of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health-related components for government, compensated by increased support for the fossil fuel industries that are destroying the prospects for survival. And, as usual, more funding for the military and for the [border] wall that is a central part of his electoral strategy. The corporate leaders Trump has installed to supervise environmental destruction are quietly eliminating regulations that somewhat constrain the damage and that protect the population from poisoning water supplies and the air they breathe. The latter reveals sharply the malevolence of the Trump phenomenon. In the midst of an unprecedented respiratory pandemic, Trump's minions are seeking to increase air pollution, which makes COVID-19 more deadly, [endangering tens of thousands of Americans](#). But it doesn't much matter. Most have no choice but to live near the polluting plants — [those] who are poor and Black, and who vote the "wrong" way.

Again, there are beneficiaries: his prime constituency of private wealth and corporate power.

Turning to the third concern of the Doomsday Clock analysts, Trump has accelerated his program to dismantle American democracy. The executive branch has been virtually dismantled, converted to a collection of cowardly sycophants who do not dare to offend the master. His latest step was to fire the State of New York prosecutor who was investigating the swamp that Trump has created in Washington. He was carrying forward the investigation of the inspectors general who Trump purged when they were getting too close. The next projected step, we have just learned, is to be a [purge of the military command](#), to ensure faithful obedience to the aspiring tin-pot dictator in the event of an international or domestic crisis of his making.

Trump is mimicked closely by Jair Bolsonaro; farce imitating tragedy. But in Brazil, there is still a slim barrier to executive criminality: the Supreme Court, which blocked Bolsonaro's moves to purge the authorities investigating his own swamp. The U.S. trails well behind.

It is quite an achievement in a mere six months to have significantly escalated all three of the threats to survival that have moved the Doomsday Clock toward midnight, while at the same time, administering a spectacular failure to deal with the pandemic. Under Trump's leadership, the U.S., with 4 percent of the world's population, has by now registered 20 percent of [COVID-19] cases. According to a [study](#) in a leading medical journal, almost all are attributable to the refusal by Trump and associates to respect the advice of scientists.

In late March, the U.S. and EU had about the same number of coronavirus cases. Europe adopted the results of U.S. scientific studies, and cases have very sharply declined. Under Trump, cases have increased to over five times the EU level. European researchers are wondering whether U.S. has just given up. Europe is now [considering a ban on travelers](#) from the pariah state that Trump and associates are constructing.

The idea that the U.S. government has given up is mistaken. A more accurate conclusion is that the rulers simply don't care. Their concern is to maintain power and to shape the future society in their image. The fate of the general population is someone else's business.

The task of forging the future world is not left to executive orders. It is by now virtually the sole concern of the Senate, with a Republican majority that is perhaps even more subservient to the master than the executive. Mitch McConnell's Senate has virtually abandoned any pretense of being a deliberative or legislative body. Its task is to serve wealth and corporate power while packing the judiciary, top to bottom, with young ultra-right Federalist Society products who will be able to protect the reactionary Trump-McConnell agenda for many years, whatever the public might want.

The latest Republican effort to punish the population is to call upon the Supreme Court to terminate the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") — as always, offering nothing in its place but empty promises.

Trumpian malevolence is merely bringing to light far deeper malignancies of the socioeconomic order that cannot be ignored if we are to avoid the next and probably worse pandemic, or to deal with the truly existential threats to survival that Trump is working hard to make much more severe.

These are the questions we face as we ask ourselves what we can do to shape the emergence from the current health crisis.

Since the eruption of nationwide demonstrations in defense of Black lives and in

support of defunding the police, we have witnessed massive shifts in public attitudes on racism and growing defiance against Trump by leading establishment figures and even within his own party. Can you analyze racism in the Trump era, and speculate as to whether the country is ready for a new era in race relations?

Some insight into “racism in the Trump era” is provided by the record of racially motivated violence. According to the Anti-Defamation League, in 2016, before Trump took office, this curse accounted for 20 percent of terrorism-related deaths in the U.S. By 2018, the figure rose to 98 percent. And it has continued since. FBI Director Christopher Wray reported that racially and ethnically motivated extremists had been the primary source of ideologically motivated lethal incidents and violence since 2018, and that 2019 marked the deadliest year of white supremacist violence since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, [*Foreign Affairs reports*](#).

That is one face of racism in the Trump era, regularly fanned from the White House. The current demonstrations reflect critical tendencies in the opposite direction. The demonstrations are unprecedented: in scale, in commitment, in solidarity and in popular support, reaching well beyond what Martin Luther King Jr. achieved when he was still a popular figure.

These remarkable demonstrations testify to significant changes in popular consciousness. Trump, of course, has been trying hard to stir up his white supremacist voting bloc while tweeting wild charges about how the country is under siege by the violent radicals who run the Democratic Party. But his familiar techniques do not seem to be working as before.

So far, the [short-term] goals of the demonstrators seem to be mostly focused on policing. This focus on police practices leads directly to inquiry into much more fundamental features of American society. There is ample evidence that police violence in the U.S. is well beyond comparable societies, but it doesn’t take place in a social vacuum. The U.S. is a far more violent society.

Violence, of course, isn’t in the genes. It arises from social maladies that are reflected in many aspects of the society, not least its very low ranking among OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] countries in social justice measures. It’s clear why these maladies have a radically disproportionate impact on the Black community. Police violence is a symptom, which cannot be cured while ignoring its roots.

The spread of protests, especially to small-town America, has also brought to light

the utterly weird phenomenon of the militia movement in the United States. To what extent is the political ideology of the Republican Party under Trump linked to the extreme anti-government ideology of the militia movement?

Apart from the assault on the Michigan State Legislature by the armed Michigan Liberty Militia (“very good people,” Donald Trump assured us), the most dramatic recent case was at the village of Bethel, Ohio. A peaceful demonstration of a few dozen people in support of Black Lives Matter was attacked by 700 counterprotesters from motorcycle gangs, “back the blue” groups, and proponents of the Second Amendment, many armed or with baseball bats and clubs. The Second Amendment has nothing to do with the demonstration, but has become a rallying cry among right-wing groups, constantly evoked by Trump, always irrelevantly, to inflame the [“tough guys”](#) he is counting on.

As for political ideology, modern Republicans like to intone Reagan’s slogan that government is the problem, not the solution. But always tongue-in-cheek. Their idol expanded the federal government ([while almost tripling the national debt](#)). It’s true that the ideology of the modern Republican party is in part anti-government. For them, government has a serious flaw; it is somewhat responsive to the general public. The flaw can be remedied by transferring policy-making to private tyrannies that are completely unaccountable to the public. But government is sometimes the solution for Republicans. One instance is when state power is needed to crush popular interference with the doctrines of the faith, the hallmark of neoliberalism from its origins in interwar Vienna, as we discussed earlier. Government is also the solution for the huge public subsidies for the corporate sector, and more visibly, when the corporate crime wave that has been unleashed by neoliberal principles crashes the economy, as has been happening regularly since Reagan. The masters then run hat in hand to the nanny state to be bailed out. That is happening again today, though this time the corporate greed mandated by neoliberal doctrine is only partially responsible; when the pandemic struck, corporations that had been enriching wealthy shareholders and management with stock buybacks have been demanding, and receiving, public largesse as usual.

On top of that, it always makes sense not to let an opportunity go to waste. Thanks to friends in high places, [“Nearly 82 percent of the benefits](#) from the tax law change [in the coronavirus stimulus] will go to people making \$1m or more annually in 2020.”

The guiding neoliberal principle is simply a sharper version of the traditional understanding that the proper function of government is to “protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” as James Madison instructed at the Constitutional Convention. Government’s prime concern is the welfare of “the men of best quality,” as they called themselves a century earlier during the first modern democratic revolution in 17th-century England. The “rabble” will somehow fend for themselves.

How? In the neoliberal world, the solution for them is to join the precariat, deprived of support systems (“there is no society”), health programs, child care, vacations, secure pensions, in fact any way to escape the ravages of the market, whatever it brings.

Pensions illustrate neoliberal logic well. The first step has been to dissolve them into private 401(k)s. That might lead to higher returns for those who are lucky, and to disaster for those who are not, but either way, withdrawal of security turns people’s minds way from “dangerous illusions” like solidarity and mutual support to isolation in an uncertain market. The next step has just been taken by Eugene Scalia, who was chosen to be labor secretary on the basis of his credentials as a corporate lawyer strongly opposed to labor rights. Under the cover of the pandemic, he quietly [opened the 401\(k\) market](#) to the destructive private equity firms, offering them a huge source of profit and inflated management fees.

Proceeding further, after firing the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, who stepped out of line by exploring his swamp in Washington, Trump nominated as his replacement Jay Clayton, a private equity lawyer who is a long-time advocate of changing federal law “to let asset managers funnel more money from retirees to those high-risk, high-fee firms,” [David Sirota reports](#) in another of his invaluable exposés of state-corporate crimes. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which monitors these shady organizations, issued another scathing report on their malpractice, which Sirota interprets, plausibly, as a “desperate cry for help” to prevent the stagecoach robbery underway. But to head off that threat, Sirota notes further, the Supreme Court quietly “restricted the SEC’s power to punish private equity firms.”

The circle tightens. Hold on to your hats as the new age is forged by the masters, step by step — if we let them have their way.

Since the outbreak of coronavirus, Joe Biden seems to have recognized that many of the problems facing the contemporary United States are structural, not

cyclical. Indeed, Biden seems to have [moved further to the left](#) since Bernie Sanders suspended his presidential campaign on April. This raises the interesting question on whether Biden himself has changed or whether it is the politics and culture of the Democratic Party itself that have changed. Can you comment on the policy agenda of Biden and on the possibly changing face of the Democratic Party?

What Biden recognizes I don't know. We can however read his program, which has been pressed well to the left. Not by the Democratic National Committee or the donor class. Rather by direct engagement of Sanders and his associates, and most important, by the constant activism of the groups that the Sanders campaign brought together and inspired. Whether the face will continue to change depends on whether these forces will continue to mobilize and to act.

It's well to remember the traditional left perspective on the quadrennial extravaganzas, including the current one.

There is an official doctrine that politics reduces to voting in an election, and then going home to leave matters to others. That's a wonderful way to suppress the population and maintain authoritarian control. The terminology that is used to implement this technique of control is "vote for X," and you've fulfilled your responsibility as a citizen.

The establishment doctrine is available both for those who favor government policy and those who oppose it. In the latter form, it has recently been called "lesser evil voting," given the acronym LEV.

The traditional left doctrine is very different. It holds that politics consists of constant activism to resist oppression, not only from government, but from even harsher private power, and to develop people's movements to promote justice and popular control of institutions. Every few years an event comes around called an "election." One takes a few minutes to see if there is a significant difference between the candidates, and if there is, to take another few minutes to vote against the worst one and then get back to work. To illustrate the choice, consider global warming, plainly a critical matter (for some, like me, the most critical in human history, along with nuclear war). Democrats and Republicans differ sharply on the issue. The [latest study](#) by the Pew Research Center finds that, *Americans continue to be deeply politically divided over how much human activity contributes to climate change. About seven-in-ten Democrats (72%) say human activity contributes a great deal to climate change, compared with roughly two-in-*

ten Republicans (22%), a difference of 50 percentage points. The difference is even wider among those at the ends of the ideological spectrum. A large majority of liberal Democrats (85%) say human activity contributes a great deal to climate change. Only 14% of conservative Republicans say the same.

This coming November, the difference between the candidates is a chasm.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

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