

Chomsky: We Need Genuine International Cooperation To Tackle The Climate Crisis



Noam Chomsky

Global warming is accelerating, bringing the world close to the edge of the precipice. Heat waves, floods and deaths are major news, and as *Truthout* has [reported](#), “this summer’s record-breaking temperatures caused by a climate catastrophe that, until recently, even the most pessimistic climatologists thought was still two or three decades out.” Yet, as Noam Chomsky points out in the interview below, corporate media devoted [almost as much coverage](#) in one day to a space cowboy than it did the entire year of 2020 to the biggest crisis facing humanity.

Is the world losing the war against climate change? Why is there still climate crisis denial and inactivism? The choice is clear: We need global action to tame global warming or face apocalyptic consequences, says Chomsky, a globally renowned public intellectual who is Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona and Institute Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and is the author of more than 150 books on topics such as linguistics, international affairs, U.S. foreign policy, political economy and mass media.

C.J. Polychroniou: Climate emergency facts are piling up almost on a daily basis — extreme heat waves in various parts of the U.S. and Canada, with temperatures rising even above 49 degrees Celsius (over 120 degrees Fahrenheit); deadly

floods in western Europe, with close to 200 dead and hundreds remaining unaccounted for in the flooding; and Moscow experienced its [second-hottest June](#). In fact, the extreme weather conditions even have climate scientists surprised, and they are now wondering about the accuracy of prediction models. What are your thoughts on these matters? It appears that the world is losing the war against global warming.

Noam Chomsky: You probably remember that three years ago, Oxford physicist Raymond Pierrehumbert, a lead author of the just-released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, wrote that “it’s time to panic.... We are in deep trouble.”

What has been learned since only intensifies that warning. An IPCC draft report leaked to *Agence France-Presse* in June 2021 listed irreversible tipping points that are ominously close, [warning](#) of “progressively serious, centuries-long and, in some cases, irreversible consequences.”

Last November 3 was a narrow escape from what might well have been indescribable disaster. Another four years of Trump’s passionate racing to the abyss might have reached those tipping points. And if the denialist party returns to power, it may be too late to panic. We are indeed in deep trouble.

The leaked IPCC draft was from before the extreme weather events of summer 2021, which shocked climate scientists. Heating of the planet “is pretty much in line with climate model predictions from decades ago,” [climate scientist Michael Mann observed](#), but “the rise in extreme weather is exceeding the predictions.” The reason seems to be an effect of heating of the atmosphere that had not been considered in climate studies: wobbling of the jet stream, which is causing the extreme events that have plagued much of the world in the past few weeks.

The frightening news has a good side. It may awaken global leaders to recognition of the horrors that they are creating. It’s conceivable that seeing what’s happening before their eyes might induce even the GOP and its *Fox News* echo chamber to indulge in a glimpse of reality.

We have seen signs of that in the COVID crisis. After years of immersion in their world of “alternative facts,” some Republican governors who have been mocking precautions are taking notice, now that the plague is striking their own states because of lack of preventive measures and vaccine refusal. As Florida took the

lead nationwide in cases and deaths, Gov. Ron DeSantis backed way ([only partially](#)) from his ridicule — eliciting charges of [selling out](#) to the enemy from party stalwarts and perhaps endangering his presidential aspirations. A shift which might, however, be too late to influence the loyal party base that has been subjected to a stream of disinformation.

Possibly the sight of cities drowning and burning up may also dent GOP-Fox loyalty to the slogan “Death to intelligence, Viva death,” borrowed from the annals of fascism.

The denialism of environmental destruction naturally has an impact on public opinion. According to the [most recent polls](#), for 58 percent of Republicans, climate change is “not an important concern.” A little over 40 percent deny that humans make a significant contribution to this impending catastrophe. And 44 percent think that “climate scientists have too much influence on climate policy debates.”

If there ever is a historical reckoning of this critical moment in history — possibly by some alien intelligence after humans have wrecked this planet — and if a Museum of Evil is established in memory of the crime, the GOP-Fox dyad will have a special room in their honor.

Responsibility is far broader, however. There is no space to review the dismal record, but one small item gives the general picture. The indispensable media analysis organization *FAIR* [reports a study](#) comparing coverage on morning TV of the climate crisis with Jeff Bezos’s space launch: 267 minutes in all of 2020 on the most important issue in human history, 212 minutes on a single day for Bezos’s silly PR exercise.

Returning to your question, humanity is quite clearly losing the war, but it is far from over. A better world is possible, we know how to achieve it, and many good people are actively engaged in the struggle. The crucial message is to panic now, but not to despair.

One of the most worrisome developments regarding the climate crisis is that while virtually all of the published climate science shows the impacts of global warming are increasingly irreversible, climate skepticism and inactivism remain quite widespread. In your view, is climate crisis denial motivated by cultural and

economic factors alone, or is there possibly something else also at work? Specifically, I am wondering if there is a connection between postmodern attacks on science and objectivity and climate science denial and inactivism.

There was a skeptical crisis in the 17th century. It was real, a significant moment in intellectual history. It led to a much better understanding of the nature of empirical inquiry. I'm not convinced that the postmodern critique has improved on this.

With regard to your question, I doubt that the postmodern critique has had much of an impact, if any, outside of rather narrow educated circles. The major sources of climate science denial — in fact much broader rejection of science — seem to me to lie elsewhere, deep in the culture.

I was a student 75 years ago. If evolution was brought up in class, it was preceded by what's now called a trigger warning: "You don't have to believe this, but you should know what some people believe." This was in an Ivy League college.

Today, for large parts of the population, deeply held religious commitments conflict with the results of scientific inquiry. Therefore, science must be wrong, a cult of liberal intellectuals in urban dens of iniquity infected by people who are not "true Americans" (no need to spell out who *they* are). All of this has been inflamed by the very effective use of irrationality in the Trump era, including his skillful resort to constant fabrication, eroding the distinction between truth and falsehood. For a showman with deeply authoritarian instincts, and few principles beyond self-glorification and abject service to the welfare of the ultrarich, there's no better slogan than: "Believe me, not your lying eyes."

The organization that Trump now owns, which years ago was an authentic political party, had already moved on a path that provided a generous welcome to such a figure. We've [discussed previously](#) how the brief Republican flirtation with reality on environmental destruction during the McCain campaign was quickly terminated by the Koch brothers' campaign of intimidation. The last time Republican leaders spoke freely without obeisance to Trump, in the 2016 primaries, all were loyal climate denialists, or worse.

Scientists are human. They're not above criticism, nor their institutions. One can find error, dishonesty, childish feuds, all of the normal human flaws. But to be critical of *science* as such is to condemn the human quest to understand the world

in which we live. And truly to abandon hope.

Many discussions on the climate crisis revolve around “equity” and “justice.” Leaving aside the question of “climate equity vs. climate justice,” especially in the context of the Paris Agreement, how much importance should we assign to these debates in the context of the overall goal of decarbonizing the global economy, which is obviously the only way to tackle the existential crisis of global warming?

It shouldn't be overlooked that it is the small, very affluent minority, most of them in the rich countries, who have overwhelming responsibility for the environmental crisis, in the past and right now. Decarbonizing and concern for equity and justice, therefore, considerably overlap. Beyond that, even on narrow pragmatic grounds, putting aside moral responsibility, the major socioeconomic changes required for the necessary scale of decarbonization must enlist committed mass popular support, and that will not be achieved without a substantial measure of justice.

Robert Pollin has been making the case for a Global Green New Deal as the only effective way to tackle global warming, and the two of you are co-authors of the recently published work, Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet. No doubt, we need internationalism in the fight against climate breakdown because, as you have so aptly put it yourself, it is either “extinction or internationalism.” My question to you is twofold: Firstly, how do you understand “internationalism” in the current historical juncture where, in spite of all of the globalizing processes under way in the course of the past 40 or 50 years, the nation-state remains the central agency? And, secondly, what system changes are required to give “internationalism” a real fighting chance in the war against the apocalyptic consequences of global warming which are already knocking at humanity's door?

There are many forms of internationalism. It's worthwhile to think about them. They carry lessons.

One form of internationalism is the specific kind of “globalization” that has been imposed during the neoliberal years through a series of investor-rights agreements masquerading as free trade. It constitutes a form of class war.

Another form of internationalism is the Axis alliance that brought us World War II. A pale reflection is Trump's sole geostrategic program: construction of an alliance

of reactionary states run from Washington, including as one core component the Middle East Abraham Accords and its side agreements with the Egyptian and Saudi dictatorships, taken over by Biden.

Still another form of internationalism has been championed on occasion by workers' movements, in the U.S. by the "Wobblies," the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Other unions, too, have the term "international" in their names, a relic of commitment to true internationalism.

In Europe, the most eloquent spokesperson for this form of internationalism was Rosa Luxemburg. The conflict between internationalism and chauvinism came to a head with the outbreak of World War I. Chauvinism conquered. The Socialist International collapsed. [In Luxemburg's acidic words](#), the slogan, "Proletarians of all countries united" was abandoned in favor of "Proletarians of all countries cut each other's throat."

Luxemburg held true to the internationalist vision, a rare stance. In all countries, intellectuals across the political spectrum rallied enthusiastically to the chauvinist cause. Those who did not were likely to find their way to prison, like Luxemburg: Karl Liebknecht, Bertrand Russell, Eugene Debs. The IWW was crushed by state-capital violence.

Turning to the present, we find other manifestations of internationalism. When the COVID pandemic broke out in early 2020, the rich countries of central Europe at first managed to get it more or less under control, a success that collapsed when Europeans chose not to forego their summer vacations.

While Germany and Austria were still in fairly good shape in early 2020, there was, however, a severe pandemic in northern Italy a few miles to their south, within the Europe Union. Italy did benefit from true internationalism — not on the part of its rich neighbors. Rather, from the world's one country with internationalist commitments: Cuba, which sent doctors to help, as it did elsewhere, extending a record that goes far back. Among others, Panama received assistance from Cuba, but the U.S. took care of that. In its final 2020 report, Trump's Department of Health and Human Services proudly announced that it had successfully pressured Panama to expel Cuban doctors to protect the hemisphere from Cuba's "malign" influence.

The malign influence, spelled out in the early days of Cuban independence in

1959, was that Cuba might infect Latin America with its “successful defiance” of U.S. policies since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. To prevent this threat, the U.S. launched a major campaign of terror and economic strangulation, following the logic spelled out at the State Department in 1960 by Lester Mallory. He recognized, as U.S. intelligence knew, that the “majority of Cubans support Castro,” and that the “only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship.” Therefore, “it follows that every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba ... to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.”

The policy has been rigorously followed with bipartisan fervor in the face of unanimous world opposition (Israel excepted). The days of “decent respect for the opinions of mankind” have long faded to oblivion, along with such frivolities as the UN Charter and the rule of law. It is astonishing that Cuba has survived the relentless assault.

The successes of the policy of strangulation and torture are reported with no little exuberance, an unusual exhibition of sadistic cowardice. Among the many popular protests underway in Latin America, one is front page news: in Cuba, giving Biden an opportunity to slap even more sanctions on the “villain” for its resort to abusive measures to suppress the demonstrations, which appear to be mostly about “economic dissatisfaction and hardship,” and failures of the authoritarian government to respond in timely and effective fashion.

Cuba’s unique internationalism is also undermined, freeing the world from any departure from the norm of self-interest, rarely breached in more than the most limited ways.

That must change. It is by now broadly understood that hoarding of vaccines by the rich countries is not only morally obscene but also self-destructive. The virus will mutate in countries with nondominant economies, and among those refusing vaccination in the rich countries, posing severe dangers to everyone on Earth, the rich included. Much more seriously, heating of the planet also knows no borders. There will be nowhere to hide for long. The same is true of the growing threat of nuclear war among major powers: the end.

Rosa Luxemburg and the Wobblies sketched the kinds of “system changes”

toward which humanity should strive, in one or another way. Short of the goals they envisioned, steps must be taken toward engaging an informed and concerned public in international institutions of solidarity and mutual aid, eroding borders, recognizing our shared fate, committing ourselves to working together for the common good instead of “cutting each other’s throats.”

Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

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).