

Noam Chomsky: Right-Wing Insurrection in Brazil Held Strong Echoes of January 6



Noam Chomsky

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The right-wing riot and insurrection led on January 8 by followers of Brazil's incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro had strong echoes of the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump's supporters. Like Trump supporters' mob attack on January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C., the January 8, 2023, insurrection in the capital city of Brasília grew out of weeks of protests by supporters of an incumbent president who refused to accept electoral defeat in a fall election. Both cases reveal how fragile liberal representative democracies have become in the neoliberal era, argues Noam Chomsky in the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, adding that we may not have seen the last of such events either in the U.S. or in Latin America.

Chomsky is institute professor emeritus in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. One of the world's most-cited scholars and a public intellectual regarded by millions of people as a national and international treasure, Chomsky has published more than 150 books in linguistics, political and social thought, political

economy, media studies, U.S. foreign policy and world affairs. His latest books are *Illegitimate Authority: Facing the Challenges of Our Time* (forthcoming; with C.J. Polychroniou); *The Secrets of Words* (with Andrea Moro; MIT Press, 2022); *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power* (with Vijay Prashad; The New Press, 2022); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, 2021).

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, on January 8, 2023, supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro stormed government buildings because they wouldn't accept the defeat of their fascist leader — an event, incidentally, that you strongly feared might take place almost from the moment that Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the presidential election. The insurrection of course has raised a lot of questions inside Brazil, as well as abroad, about the role of the Brazilian police, the failure of the intelligence services to warn Lula about what was going to happen and who orchestrated the riots. This was undoubtedly an attempted coup, just like the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and should serve as yet another reminder of how fragile liberal democracies have become in the neoliberal era. Can you comment on these matters?

Noam Chomsky: Fragile indeed. The January 6 attempted coup could have succeeded if a few people had made different decisions and if Trump had succeeded in replacing the top military command, as he was apparently trying to do in his last days in office.

January 6 was unplanned, and the leader was so consumed by narcissistic rage that he couldn't direct what was happening. January 8, clearly modelled on its predecessor, was well-planned and financed. Early inquiries suggest that it may have been financed by small businesses and perhaps by agricultural interests concerned that their free rein to destroy the Amazon would be infringed. It was well-advertised in advance. It's impossible that the security services were not aware of the plans. In Brasília itself — pro-Bolsonaro territory — they pretty much cooperated with the marauders. The army watched the coup being well organized and supplied in encampments outside military installations nearby.

With impressive unity that was lacking in the U.S., Brazilian officials and elites condemned the Bolsonarist uprising and supported newly elected president Lula's decisive actions to suppress it. There is nothing like the U.S. denialist movement

in high places. The uprising itself was savage and indiscriminate, as amply portrayed in the extensive TV coverage. The apparent intention was to create sufficient chaos so that the military would have a pretext for taking over and reestablishing the brutal dictatorship that Bolsonaro greatly admired.

International opposition to the insurrection was also immediate and forceful, most importantly of course, that of Washington. According to the well-informed Brazilian political analyst Liszt Vieira, who shared his thoughts with [Fórum 21](#) on January 16, President Biden, while no admirer of Lula, “sent 4 diplomats to defend the Brazilian electoral system and send a message to the military: No coup!” His report is confirmed by John Lee Anderson in a [judicious account](#) of the unfolding events.

If the January 6 coup attempt had succeeded, or if its copy had taken place during a Republican administration, Brazil might have returned to the grim years of military dictatorship.

I doubt that we’ve seen the end of this in the U.S. or in “our little region over here” as Latin America was called by Secretary of War Henry Stimson when explaining why all regional systems should be dismantled in the new era of post-war U.S. hegemony, except our own.

The fragility of democracies through the neoliberal era is apparent enough, beginning with the oldest and best-established of them, England and the U.S. It is also no surprise. Neoliberalism, pretensions and rhetoric aside, is basically class war. That goes back to the roots of neoliberalism and its close cousin austerity after World War I, a topic discussed in [very illuminating recent work](#) by Clara Mattei.

As such, a core principle is to insulate economic policy from public influence and pressure, either by placing it in the hands of professional experts (as in the liberal democracies) or by violence (as under fascism). The modalities are not sharply distinguished. Organized labor must be eliminated because it interferes with the “sound economics” that transfers wealth to the very rich and corporate sector. Investor rights agreements masked as “free trade” made their own contribution. A range of policies, legislative and judicial, left the political systems even more in the hands of concentrated private capital than the norm, while wages stagnated, benefits declined and much of the workforce drifted to precarity, living from

paycheck to paycheck with little in reserve.

Of course, respect for institutions declines — rightly — and formal democracy erodes, exactly as neoliberal class war dictates.

Brazil, just like the U.S., is a deeply divided nation, virtually on the verge of a civil war. Having said that, I believe Lula has a very difficult task ahead of him in terms of uniting the nation and pushing forth a new policy agenda based on progressive values. Should we be surprised therefore if his government falls short of carrying out radical reforms, as many seem to expect a leftist president to do?

I don't see any prospect of radical reforms, either in Brazil or in the neighboring countries where there has recently been a new "pink tide" of left political victories. The elected leadership is not committed to radical institutional change, and if they were, they would face the powerful opposition of internal concentrations of economic power and conservative cultural forces, often shaped by the evangelical churches, along with hostile international power — economic, subversive, military — that has not abandoned its traditional vocation of maintaining order and subordination in "our little region over here."

What can realistically be hoped for in Brazil is carrying forward the projects of President Lula's first terms, which the World Bank in a study of Brazil called its "golden decade," with sharp reduction in poverty and significant expansion of inclusiveness in a dramatically unequal society. Lula's Brazil may also recover the international standing it achieved during his first terms, when Brazil became one of the most respected countries in the world and an effective voice for the Global South, all lost during the Bolsonaro regression.

Some knowledgeable analysts are still more optimistic. Jeffrey Sachs, after intense discussions with the new government, concluded that growth and development prospects are favorable and that Brazil's development and international role could "help reform the global architecture — including finance and foreign policy — for the benefit of sustainable development."

Of paramount importance, not just for Brazil but for the whole world, would be resuming and extending the protection of the Amazon that was a highlight of Lula's first terms, and that was reversed by Bolsonaro's lethal policies of enabling mining and agribusiness destruction that were already beginning to turn parts of the forest to savannah, an irreversible process that will turn one of the world's

greatest carbon sinks into a carbon producer. With the dedicated environmentalist Marina Silva now in charge of environmental issues, there is some hope of saving this precious resource from destruction, with awesome global consequences.

There is also some hope of rescuing the Indigenous inhabitants of the forests. Some of Lula's first actions on regaining the presidency were to visit Indigenous communities that had been subjected to the terror unleashed by Bolsonaro's assault on the Amazon and its inhabitants. The scenes of misery, of children reduced to virtual skeletons, of disease and destruction, are beyond words to describe, at least mine. Perhaps these hideous crimes will come to an end.

These would be no slight achievements. They might help lay a firmer basis for the more radical institutional change that Brazilians need and deserve — and not Brazil alone. A basis is already there. Brazil is the home of the world's largest left popular movement, the Landless Workers Movement (MST), which takes over unused lands to form productive communities, often with flourishing cooperatives — to be sure, not without bitter struggle. The MST is establishing links with a major urban left popular movement, the Landless Worker's Movement. Its most prominent figure, Guilherme Boulos, is close to Lula, representing tendencies that might be able to forge a path beyond the incremental improvements that are desperately needed in themselves.

The left, no matter where it comes to power, seems to fall short of expectations. In fact, often enough, it ends up carrying out the very neoliberal policy agenda that it challenges while in opposition. Is it because neoliberalism is such a formidable foe, or because today's left lacks both a strategy and a vision beyond capitalism?

There has long been a lively left culture in Latin America, which the northern colossus can learn from. The internal and external barriers, which are formidable quite beyond their neoliberal incarnation, have sufficed to constrain hopes and expectations. Latin America has often seemed on the verge of breaking free from these constraints. It might do so now. That could help propel the developments towards multipolarity that are apparent today and that might, just might, open the way to a much better world. Entrenched power, however, does not just melt away.

We speak of political crises, economic crises and an ecological and climate crisis,

among others, but it seems to me that we should also be talking of a humanity crisis. By that, I mean we may be on the verge of the dawn of an anti-Enlightenment era, with capitalism and irrationality having gone berserk and being at the root of a widespread ontological transition. Do you have any thoughts to share on this matter? Are we confronted with the possibility of the rise of an anti-Enlightenment era?

We should bear in mind that the Enlightenment was not exactly a bed of roses for most of the world. It was accompanied by the unleashing of what Adam Smith called “the savage injustice of the Europeans,” a horrific onslaught against most the world. The most advanced societies, India and China, were devastated by European savagery, in its latter stages the world’s most awesome narcotrafficking racket, which ravaged India to raise the opium that was rammed down the throats of China by barbarians led by England, with its North American offshoot not far behind, and other imperial powers joining in what China calls the century of humiliation. In the Americas and Africa, the criminal destruction was far worse, in ways too well-known to recount.

There were lofty ideals, with limited though significant reach. And it is true that they have been under severe attack.

The fact that unrestrained capitalism is a death sentence for humanity can no longer be concealed with soothing words. Imperial violence, religious nationalism and accompanying pathologies are running rampant. What is evolving before our eyes raises in ever starker form the question that should have struck all of us with blinding fury 77 years ago: Can humans close the gap between their technological capacity to destroy and their moral capacity to control this impulse?

It is not just a question, but the ultimate question, in that if it does not receive a positive answer, and soon, no one will long care about any others.

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