Noam Chomsky: "Worship of Markets" Is Threatening Human Civilization

We live in dangerous times — no doubt about it. How did we get to such a state of affairs where democracy itself is in a very fragile condition and the future of human civilization itself at stake? In this interview, renowned thinker, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at MIT and Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona Noam Chomsky, sheds light on the state of the world and the condition of the only superpower left in the global arena.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, looking at the current state of the world, I think it is not an exaggeration at all to say that we live in ominously dangerous times — and not simply in a period of great global complexity, confusion and uncertainty, which, after all, has been the "normal" state of the global political condition in the modem era. I believe, in fact, that we are in the midst of a whirlpool of events and developments that are eroding our capacity to manage human affairs in a way that is conducive to the attainment of a political and economic order based on stability, justice and sustainability. Indeed, the contemporary world is fraught, in my own mind at least, with perils and challenges that will test severely humanity's ability to maintain a steady course toward anything resembling a civilized life.

How did we get to such a state of affairs, with tremendous economic inequalities and the resurgence of the irrational in political affairs on the one hand, and an uncanny capacity, on the other, to look away from the existential crises such as global warming and nuclear weapons which will surely destroy civilized life as we know it if we continue with "business as usual"?

Noam Chomsky: How indeed.
The question of how we got to this state of affairs is truly vast in scope, requiring not just inquiry into the origin and nature of social and cultural institutions but also into depths of human psychology that are barely understood. We can,

however, take a much more modest stab at the questions, asking about certain highly consequential decisions that could have been made differently, and about specific cases where we can identify some of the roots of looking away.

The history of nuclear weapons provides some striking cases. One critical decision was in 1944, when Germany was out of the war and it was clear that the only target was Japan. One cannot really say that a decision was made to proceed nevertheless to create devices that could devastate Japan even more thoroughly, and in the longer term threaten to destroy us as well. It seems that the question never seriously arose, apart from such isolated figures as Joseph Rotblat — who was later barred reentry to the U.S.

Another critical decision that was not made was in the early 1950s. At the time, there were still no long-range delivery systems for nuclear weapons (ICBMs). It might have been possible to reach an agreement with Russia to bar their development. That was a plausible surmise at the time, and release of Russian archives makes it seem an even more likely prospect. Remarkably, there is no trace of any consideration of pursuing steps to bar the only weapons systems that would pose a lethal threat to the U.S., so we learn from McGeorge Bundy's standard work on the history of nuclear weapons, with access to the highest-level sources. Perhaps still more remarkably, there has, to my knowledge, been no voiced interest in this astonishing fact.

It is easy to go on. The result is 75 years of living under the threat of virtually total destruction, particularly since the successful development of thermonuclear weapons by 1953 — in this case a decision, rather than lack of one. And as the record shows all too graphically, it is a virtual miracle that we have survived the nuclear age thus far.

That raises your question of why we look away. I do not understand it, and never have. The question has been on my mind almost constantly since that grim day in August 1945 when we heard the news that an atom bomb had wiped out Hiroshima, with hideous casualties. Apart from the terrible tragedy itself, it was at once clear that human intelligence had devised the means to destroy us all — not quite yet, but there could be little doubt that once the genie was out of the bottle, technological developments would carry the threat to the end. I was then a junior counselor in a summer camp. The news was broadcast in the morning. Everyone listened — and then went off to the planned activity — a baseball game,

swimming, whatever was scheduled. I couldn't believe it. I was so shocked I just took off into the woods and sat by myself for several hours. I still can't believe it, or understand how that has persisted even as more has been learned about the threats. The same sentiments have been voiced by others, recently by William Perry [former defense secretary], who has ample experience on the inside. He reports that he is doubly terrified: by the growing risk of terrible catastrophe, and the failure to be terrified by it.

It was not known in 1945, but the world was then entering into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, in which human activity is having a severe impact on the environment that sustains life. Warnings about the potential threat of global warming date back to a 1958 paper by Hans Suess and Roger Revelle, and by the 1970s, concerns were deeply troubling to climate scientists. ExxonMobil scientists were in the forefront of spelling out the severe dangers. That is the background for a crucial decision by ExxonMobil management in 1989, after (and perhaps because) James Hansen had brought the grave threat to public attention. In 1989, management decided to lead the denialist campaign.

That continues to the present. ExxonMobil now proudly declares that it intends to extract and sell all of the 25 billion barrels in its current reserves, while continuing to seek new sources.

Executives are surely aware that this is virtually a death-knell for organized human society in any form that we know, but evidently it doesn't matter. Looking away with a vengeance.

The suicidal impulses of the fossil fuel industry have been strongly supported by Republican administrations, by now, under Trump, leaving the U.S. in splendid isolation internationally in not only refusing to participate in international efforts to address this existential threat but in devoting major efforts to accelerate the race to disaster.

It is hard to find proper words to describe what is happening — and the limited attention it receives.

This again raises your question of how we can look away. For ExxonMobil, the explanation is simple enough: The logic of the capitalist market rules — what Joseph Stiglitz 25 years ago called the "religion" that markets know best. The same reasoning extends beyond, for example to the major banks that are pouring

funds into fossil fuel extraction, including the most dangerous, like Canadian tar sands, surely in full awareness of the consequences.

CEOs face a choice: They can seek to maximize profit and market share, and (consciously) labor to undermine the prospects for life on earth; or they can refuse to do so, and be removed and replaced by someone who will. The problems are not just individual; they are institutional, hence much deeper and harder to overcome.

Something similar holds for media. In the best newspapers there are regular articles by the finest journalists applauding the fracking revolution and the opening of new areas for exploitation, driving the U.S. well ahead of Saudi Arabia in the race to destroy human civilization. Sometimes there are a few words about environmental effects: fracking in Wyoming may harm the water supplies for ranchers. But scarcely if ever is there a word on the effect on the planet — which is, surely, well understood by authors and editors.

In this case, I suppose the explanation is professionalism. The ethics of the profession requires "objectivity": reporting accurately what is going on "within the beltway" and in executive suites, and keeping to the assigned story. To add a word about the lethal broader impact would be "bias," reserved for the opinion pages.

There are countless illustrations, but I think something deeper may be involved, something related to the "religion" that Stiglitz criticized. Worship of markets has many effects. One we see in the origins of the reigning neoliberal faiths. Their origin is in post-World War I Vienna, after the collapse of the trading system within the Hapsburg empire. Ludwig von Mises and his associates fashioned the basic doctrines that were quickly labeled "neoliberalism," based on the principle of "sound economics": markets know best, no interference with them is tolerable.

There are immediate consequences. One is that labor unions, which interfere with flexibility of labor markets, must be destroyed, along with social democratic measures. Mises openly welcomed the crushing of the vibrant Austrian unions and social democracy by state violence in 1928, laying the groundwork for Austrian fascism. Which Mises welcomed as well. He became economic consultant to the proto-fascist Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, and in his major work *Liberalism*, explained that "It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar

movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history."

These themes resonate through the modern neoliberal era. The U.S. has an unusually violent labor history, but the attack on unions gained new force under Reagan with the onset of the neoliberal era. As the business press reported, employers were effectively informed that labor laws would not be enforced, and the U.S. became the only industrial society apart from Apartheid South Africa to tolerate not just scabs, but even "permanent replacement workers." Neoliberal globalization, precarity of employment, and other devices carry the process of destroying organized labor further.

These developments form a core part of the efforts to realize the Thatcherite dictum that "there is no society," only atomized individuals, who face the forces of "sound economics" alone — becoming what Marx called "a sack of potatoes" in his condemnation of the policies of the authoritarian rulers of mid-19th century Europe.

A sack of potatoes cannot react in any sensible way even to existential crises. Lacking the very bases of deliberative democracy, such as functioning labor unions and other organizations, people have little choice beyond "looking away." What can they hope to do? As Mises memorably explained, echoed by Milton Friedman and others, political democracy is superfluous — indeed an impediment to sound economics: "free competition does all that is needed" in markets that function without interference.

The pathology is not new, but can become more severe under supportive social and economic institutions and practices.

Yet, only a couple of decades ago, there was wild celebration among liberal and conservative elites alike about the "end of history," but, even today, there are some who claim that we have made great progress and that the world is better today than it has ever been in the past. Obviously, "the end of history" thesis was something of a Hegelian illusion by staunch defenders of the global capitalist order, but what about the optimism expressed by the likes of Steven Pinker regarding the present? And how can we square the fact that this liberal optimism

is not reflected by any stretch in the politico-ideological currents and trends that are in motion today both inside western nations but also around the world?

The celebrations were mostly farcical, and have been quietly shelved. On the "great progress," there is serious work. The best I know is Robert Gordon's compelling study of the rise and fall of American growth, which extends beyond the U.S. though with some modifications. Gordon observes that there was virtually no economic growth for millennia until 1770. Then came a period of slow growth for another century, and then a "special century" from 1870 to 1970, with important inventions ranging from indoor plumbing to electrical grids and transportation, which radically changed human life, with significant progress by many measures.

Since the 1970s the picture is much more mixed. The basis for the contemporary high-tech economy was established in the last decades of the special century, mainly through public investment, adapted to the market in the years that followed. There is currently rapid innovation in frills — new apps for iPhones, etc. — but nothing like the fundamental achievements of the special century. And in the U.S., there has been stagnation or decline in real wages for non-supervisory workers and in recent years, increased death rates among working-class, working-age whites, called "deaths of despair" by the economists who have documented these startling facts, Anne Case and Angus Deaton.

There is more to say about other societies. There are numerous complexities of major significance that disappear in unanalyzed statistical tables.

Realism, crystallized intellectually by Niccolò Machiavelli in The Prince,has been the guiding principle of nation-states behind their conduct of international relations from the beginning of the modem era, while idealism and morality have been seen as values best left to individuals. Is political realism driving us to the edge of the cliff? And, if so, what should replace the behavioral stance of governments in the 21st century?

The two major doctrines of International Relations Theory are Realism and Idealism. Each has their advocates, but it's true that the Realists have dominated: the world's a tough place, an anarchic system, and states maneuver to establish power and security, making coalitions, offshore balancing, etc.

I think we can put aside Idealism — though it has its advocates, including,

curiously, one of the founders and leading figures of the modern tough-minded Realist school, Hans Morgenthau. In his 1960 work, *The Purpose of American Politics*, Morgenthau argued that the U.S., unlike other societies, has a "transcendent purpose": establishing peace and freedom at home and indeed everywhere. A serious scholar, Morgenthau recognized that the historical record is radically inconsistent with the "transcendent purpose" of America, but he advised that we should not be misled by the apparent inconsistency. In his words, we should not "confound the abuse of reality with reality itself." Reality is the unachieved "national purpose" revealed by "the evidence of history as our minds reflect it." What actually happened is merely the "abuse of reality." To confound abuse of reality with reality is akin to "the error of atheism, which denies the validity of religion on similar grounds."

For the most part, however, realists adhere to Realism, without sentimentality. We might ask, however, how realistic Realism is. With a few exceptions — Kenneth Waltz for one — realists tend to ignore the roots of policy in the structure of domestic power, in which, of course, the corporate system is overwhelmingly dominant. This is not the place to review the matter, but I think it can be shown that much is lost by this stance. That's true even of the core notion of Realism: security. True, states seek security, but for whom? For the general population? For the systems of power represented by the architects of policy? Such questions cannot be casually put aside.

The two existential crises we have discussed are a case in point. Does the government policy of maximization of the use of fossil fuels contribute to the security of the population? Or of ExxonMobil and its brethren. Does the current military posture of the U.S. — dismantling the INF Treaty instead of negotiating disputes over violations, rushing ahead with hypersonic weapons instead of seeking to bar these insane weapons systems by treaty, and much else — contribute to the security of the population? Or to the component of the corporate manufacturing system in which the U.S. enjoys comparative advantage: destruction. Similar questions arise constantly.

What should replace the prevailing stance is government of, by and for the people, highlighting their concerns and needs.

The advent of globalization has been interpreted frequently enough in the recent past as leading to the erosion of the nation-state. Today, however, it is

globalization that is being challenged, first and foremost by the resurgence of nationalism. Is there a case to be made in defense of globalization? And, by extension, is all nationalism bad and dangerous?

Globalization is neither good nor bad in itself. It depends how it is implemented. Enhancing opportunities for ideas, innovations, aesthetic contributions to disseminate freely is a welcome form of globalization, as well as opportunities for people to circulate freely. The WTO system, designed to set working people in competition with one another while protecting investor rights with an exorbitant patent regime and other devices, is a form of globalization that has many harmful consequences that would be avoided in authentic trade agreements designed along different lines — and it should be borne in mind that much of the substance of the "free trade agreements" is not about free trade or even trade in any meaningful sense.

Same with nationalism. In the hands of the Nazis, it was extremely dangerous. If it is a form of bonding and mutual support within some community it can be a valuable part of human life.

The current resurgence of nationalism is in large part a reaction to the harsh consequences of neoliberal globalization, with special features such as the erosion of democracy in Europe by transfer of decision-making to the unelected Troika with the northern banks looking over their shoulders. And it can and does take quite ugly forms — the worst, perhaps, the reaction to the so-called "refugee crisis" — more accurately termed a moral crisis of the West, as Pope Francis has indicated.

But none of this is inherent in globalization or nationalism.

In your critiques of U.S. foreign policy, you often refer to the United States as the world's biggest terrorist state. Is there something unique about the United States as an imperial state? And is U.S. imperialism still alive and kicking?

The U.S. is unique in many respects. That includes the opening words of the Declaration of Independence, "We the People," a revolutionary idea, however flawed in execution. It is also a rare country that has been at war almost without a break from its first moment. One of the motives for the American Revolution was to eliminate the barrier to expansion into "Indian country" imposed by the British. With that overcome, the new nation set forth on wars against the Indian nations

that inhabited what became the national territory; wars of "extermination," as the most prominent figures recognized, notably John Quincy Adams, the architect of Manifest Destiny. Meanwhile half of Mexico was conquered in what General U.S. Grant, later president, called one of the most "wicked wars" in history.

There is no need to review record of interventions, subversion and violence, particularly since World War II, which established the U.S. in a position of global dominance with no historical precedent. The record includes the worst crime of the postwar period, the assault on Indochina, and the worst crime of this millennium, the invasion of Iraq.

Like most terms of political discourse, "imperialism" is a contested notion. Whatever term we want to use, the U.S. is alone in having hundreds of military bases and troops operating over much of the world. It is also unique in its willingness and ability to impose brutal sanctions designed to punish the people of states designated as enemies. And its market power and dominance of the international financial system provide these sanctions with extraterritorial reach, compelling even powerful states to join in, however unwillingly.

The most dramatic case is Cuba, where U.S. sanctions are strongly opposed by the entire world, to no avail. The vote against these sanctions was 189-2, U.S. and Israel, in the latest UNGA [United Nations General Assembly] condemnation. The sanctions have been in place for almost 60 years, harshly punishing Cubans for what the State Department called "successful defiance" of the U.S. Trump's sanctions on Venezuela have turned a humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe, according to the leading economist of the opposition, Francisco Rodriguez. His sanctions on Iran are quite explicitly designed to destroy the economy and punish the population.

This is no innovation. Clinton's sanctions on Iraq (joined by Blair) were so destructive that each of the distinguished international diplomats who administered the "oil for food" program resigned in protest, charging that the sanctions were "genocidal." The second, Hans-Christof von Sponeck, published a detailed and incisive book about the impact of the sanctions (*A Different Kind of War*). It has been under a virtual ban. Too revealing, perhaps.

The brutal sanctions punished the population and devastated the society, but strengthened the tyrant, compelling people to rely on his rationing system for

survival, possibly saving him from overthrow from within, as happened to a string of similar figures. That's quite standard. The same is reportedly true in Iran today.

It could be argued that the sanctions violate the Geneva Conventions, which condemn "collective punishment" as a war crime, but legalistic shenanigans can get around that.

The U.S. no longer has the capacity it once did to overthrow governments at will or to invade other countries, but it has ample means of coercion and domination, call it "imperialism" or not.

Why is the United States the only major country in the world displaying consistently an aversion to international human rights treaties, which include, among many others, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)?

The U.S. almost never ratifies international conventions, and in the few cases where it does, it is with reservations that exclude the U.S. That's even true of the Genocide Convention, which the U.S. finally did ratify after many years, exempting itself. The issue arose in 1999, when Yugoslavia brought a charge of war crimes to the ICJ [International Court of Justice] against NATO. One of the charges was "genocide." The U.S. therefore rejected World Court jurisdiction on the grounds that it was not subject to the Genocide Convention, and the Court agreed — agreeing, in effect, that the U.S. is entitled to carry out genocide with impunity.

It might be noted that the U.S. is currently alone (along with China and Taiwan) in rejecting a World Court decision, namely, the 1986 Court judgment ordering the U.S. to terminate its "unlawful use of force" against Nicaragua and to pay substantial reparations. Washington's rejection of the Court decision was applauded by the liberal media on the grounds that the Court was a "hostile forum" (*New York Times*), so its decisions don't matter. A few years earlier the Court had been a stern arbiter of Justice when it ruled in favor of the U.S. in a case against Iran.

The U.S. also has laws authorizing the executive to use force to "rescue" any American brought to the Hague — sometimes called in Europe "the Hague Invasion Act." Recently it revoked the visa of the Chief Prosecutor of the ICC

[International Criminal Court] for daring to consider inquiring into U.S. actions in Afghanistan. It goes on.

Why? It's called "power," and a population that tolerates it — and for the most part probably doesn't even know about it.

Since the Nuremberg trials between 1945-49, the world has witnessed many war crimes and crimes against humanity that have gone unpunished, and interestingly enough, some of the big powers (U.S., China and Russia) have refused to support the International Criminal Court which, among others things, can prosecute individuals for war crimes. In that context, does the power to hold leaders responsible for unjust wars, crimes against humanity, and crimes of aggression hold promise in the international order of today?

That depends on whether states will accept jurisdiction. Sometimes they do. The NATO powers (except for the U.S.) accepted ICJ jurisdiction in the Yugoslavia case, for example — presumably because they took for granted that the Court would never accept the Yugoslavian pleas, even when they were valid, as in the case of the targeted destruction of a TV station, killing 16 journalists. In the more free and democratic states, populations could, in principle, decide that their governments should obey international law, but that is a matter of raising the level of civilization.

John Bolton and other ultranationalists, and many others, argue that the U.S. must not abandon its sovereignty to international institutions and international law. They are therefore arguing that U.S. leaders should violate the Constitution, which declares that valid treaties are the supreme law of the land. That includes in particular the UN Charter, the foundation of modern international law, established under U.S. auspices.

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