

The Resurgence Of Political Authoritarianism: An Interview With Noam Chomsky



Noam Chomsky

Following the end of World War II, liberal democracy began to flourish in most countries in the Western world, and its institutions and values were aspired to by movements and individuals under authoritarian and oppressive regimes. However, with the rise of neoliberalism, both the institutions and the values of modern democracy came rapidly and continuously under attack in an effort to extend the profit-maximizing logic and practices of capitalism throughout all aspects of economic and social life.

Sketched out in broad outlines, this story explains the resurgence of authoritarian political trends in today's Western societies, including the rise of far-right movements whose followers feel threatened by the processes unleashed by neoliberal economic policies. In the former communist countries and in the non-Western world, meanwhile, authoritarianism is also on the rise, partly as a residue of authoritarian legacies, and partly as a reaction to perceived threats posed to national culture and social order by global capitalism.

Is it possible to counter this rise in extreme populism? In this exclusive Truthout interview, the world-renowned linguist and public intellectual [Noam Chomsky](#) — the author of more than 100 books and thousands of academic articles and popular essays — offers his unique insights on this and more, bringing into the analysis issues and questions that are rarely addressed in the current debates

taking place today about the resurgence of political authoritarianism.

*C.J. Polychroniou: In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published an intellectually embarrassing book titled *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which he prophesied the “end of history” after the collapse of the communist bloc, arguing that liberal democracy would become the world’s “final form of human government.” However, what has happened in this decade in particular is that the institutions and values of liberal democracy have come under attack by scores of authoritarian leaders all over the world, and extreme nationalism, xenophobia and “soft fascist” tendencies have begun reshaping the political landscape in Europe and the United States. How do you explain the resurgence of political authoritarianism in the early part of the 21st century?*

Noam Chomsky: The “political landscape” is indeed ominous. While today’s political and social circumstances are much less dire, still they do call to mind Antonio Gramsci’s warning from Mussolini’s prison cells about the severe crisis of his day, which “consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born [and] in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

One morbid symptom is the resurgence of political authoritarianism, a highly important matter that is properly receiving a great deal of attention in public debate. But “a great deal of public attention” should always be a warning sign: Does the shaping of the issues reflect power interests, which are diverting attention from what may be more significant factors behind the general concerns? In the present case, I think that is so, and before turning to the very significant question of the resurgence of political authoritarianism, I’d like to bring up related matters that do not seem to me to receive the attention they merit, and in fact are almost totally excluded from the extensive public attention.

It’s entirely true that “the institutions and values of liberal democracy are under attack” to an unusual extent, but not only by authoritarian leaders, and not for the first time. I presume all would agree that primary among the values of liberal democracy is that governments should be responsive to voters. If that is not the case, “liberal democracy” is a farce.

It has been well established that it is not the case. Ample work in mainstream political science shows that a majority of voters are not represented by their own

elected representatives, who listen to different voices — the voices of the donor class, great wealth and the corporate sector (Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*, Princeton University Press, 2014; Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*, University of Chicago press, 2017; Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, 2018, among others). Furthermore, the penetrating work of [Thomas Ferguson](#) reveals that for a long time, elections have been substantially bought, including Congress, continuing right to the present, 2016.

These facts alone show that the furor about alleged Russian interference with our pristine democratic process reveals profound indoctrination — in capitalist, not democratic, values.

Furthermore, those who find foreign interference to be especially troublesome despite its marginality should clearly be looking elsewhere. It is not even in question that Israel interferes massively in US elections and governance, proudly and ostentatiously. One recent case that was unusually brazen was in 2015, when Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed Congress without even informing President Obama in order to undermine his Iran program, a mere fragment of Israel's constant and far-reaching efforts to influence US politics.

Putting aside these secondary matters, the major attack on the institutions and values of liberal democracy is by the powerful business classes, intensifying since Reagan as both political parties have drifted toward greater subordination to their interests — the Republicans to such an extreme that by now they barely can be considered a political party. Anyone who finds this surprising must be uninformed about American society and how it functions. By now, as business power has been unleashed by its servants in the Republican Party, the traditional business attack on “the institutions and values of liberal democracy” has reached levels not seen since the Gilded Age, if even then.

Of course, it is quite legal to buy elections, to send lobbyists to congressional offices to write legislation, and in other ways “to shape public policy in a way that serves [private power's] narrow interests” — indeed, these comprise “an essential, nonaccidental part of ... business strategy,” Zephyr Teachout [writes](#) in a valuable study. Investigation has shown, she adds, that a CEO's investment in

changing laws to decrease corporate tax rates yields a vastly greater return than investment in reducing cost of production. Small wonder that all of this is normal business strategy.

Teachout cites a Supreme Court decision of 1874 which concluded that, "If any of the great corporations of the country were to hire adventurers who make market of themselves [for] the promotion of their private interests, the moral sense of every right-minded man would instinctively denounce the employer and employed as steeped in corruption." That was, of course, before the ideology of business supremacy had risen to the level of "hegemonic common sense," in Gramscian terms. The sharp transition well illustrates the force of indoctrination in a society with a powerful and highly class-conscious business community.

The Reagan-Thatcher project of enhancing untrammelled business power, carried forward and extended by their successors, has been the political reflection of a dedicated and coordinated campaign by the business classes to reverse the "crisis of democracy" of the 1960s that deeply troubled liberal international elites, who devoted the first major publication of the Trilateral Commission to this serious malady. Their prime concern was the increased engagement of popular classes in the political arena to press their demands, all of which imposes too much pressure and the state, threatening (though this remains implicit) the dominance of the business world. As the American rapporteur, Harvard professor of government Samuel Huntington, observed nostalgically, "Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers," but those happy days were disappearing under the attack of the great majority, whose role in a liberal democracy is to be passive and acquiescent, a doctrine with a rich pedigree, which I've reviewed elsewhere.

That was the liberal end of the political spectrum. Toward the conservative end, at the same time, the influential "Powell memorandum," directed to the Chamber of Commerce by corporate lawyer Lewis Powell (later appointed to the Supreme Court by Richard Nixon), called for open war by the business world to defend itself from the virtual takeover of the country by radical forces that were destroying "free enterprise" under the leadership of Ralph Nader, Herbert Marcuse and other "dangerous extremists."

The messages are pretty much the same, but the rhetoric is quite different. The liberal rhetoric is largely reserved, while the business rhetoric reaches the

frenzied pitch of a 3-year-old who has all the toys and laments that one might be taken away.

The business world, of course, did not need these reminders to dedicate its resources to reversing the democratic progress and highly successful regulated capitalism of the postwar era that was indeed infringing on business power, and crucially threatening the rate of profit, as political economist Robert Brenner has shown. The neoliberal counterattack substantially beat back these threats, sharply increasing private power and the wealth of a tiny segment of the population while leaving the majority to face economic stagnation or decline, increasingly precarious lives, and the natural loss of political influence as concentrated private economic power gains even greater dominance than before.

All of this continues under the revival from the housing-financial crisis that proceeds under Obama and Trump. The latest [report](#) of the Department of Labor finds that, “From May 2017 to May 2018, real average hourly earnings decreased 0.1 percent, seasonally adjusted. The decrease in real average hourly earnings combined with a 0.6-percent increase in the average workweek resulted in a 0.5-percent increase in real average weekly earnings over this period.” Meanwhile, surging corporate profits are inflated still further by the tax scam that is the jewel in the crown of Trump’s Republican Party, overwhelmingly used for buyouts and other devices to enrich the wealthy rather than productive investment that would benefit society and lift wages.

The other side of the coin is the Reagan-Thatcher assault on unions, now advanced by the authorization of right-to-scrounge laws (in Orwellian terminology, “right-to-work” laws) by the most reactionary Supreme Court in over a century. The guiding doctrine is to create a world of isolated individuals at the mercy of concentrated private power in accord with the Thatcherite doctrine that “there is no society,” Thatcher’s unwitting paraphrase of Marx’s bitter condemnation of authoritarian leaders who sought to turn society into a “sack of potatoes.”

There are other sources for the malaise of the general population. The radical financialization of the economy during the neoliberal years and the prioritization of shareholder value, expedited by Reagan’s “[Chicago Boys](#),” has shifted corporate behavior sharply from the retain-and-invest model of the great growth years of regimented capitalism to the “buyback economy” of the neoliberal

reaction, matters [explored](#) with much insight by William Lazonick.

Apple, the world's largest corporation in market value, was once devoted to product innovation and development. Under its new CEO, Tim Cook, it has become the "buyback king," enriching shareholders (and management). Others are doing much the same. Lazonick estimates that "trillions of dollars that could have been spent on productive investment have instead been used to buy back stock in order to boost share prices," enriching the rich but not providing meaningful and steady work or useful goods. The Republican tax scam of 2018 is having the same effects, all to the detriment of working people and the general population. The rapid increase in speculation has had similar consequences. The same is true of the repeated financial crises following deregulation, severely harming the poor and working people, though no longer the culprits in the financial industry, who are bailed out by the public and emerge richer than before.

There are remedies, but their advocates remain for now at the fringes of the political economy. Though perhaps not for long.

These are, to be sure, generalities. Like most complex processes, the rise of authoritarian leaders and the concomitant anti-social tendencies are over-determined. There are many more specific factors but the essence, I think, is along the lines just outlined.

Today's most powerful authoritarian leaders — e.g., Vladimir Putin in Russia, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Bibi Netanyahu in Israel and Donald Trump in the US, to name just a few — are enjoying widespread popularity with the masses and happen, in fact, to have risen to power via democratic means. What's going on? Is something wrong with today's democracy?

Here specific causes intrude.

In the case of Western democracies — Trump, Western Europe — what's wrong with today's democracy is its decline, with the attendant attack on prospects for a decent life as the political system falls even more than usual under the control of concentrated private power and hence becomes less responsive to human needs. These are natural consequences of the concentration of wealth under the neoliberal assault against the social democratic tendencies of the early postwar decades. It should be recalled that the Great Depression and World War II

unleashed radical democratic forces over much of the world, and although the reaction of the business world was quick to come (e.g., Taft-Hartley in 1947), it was muted until the economic disruptions of the 1970s, which provided an opportunity for vigorous class war.

It's also worth recalling the rather belated recognition in 1978 by United Auto Workers President Doug Fraser that businessmen had "chosen to wage a one-sided class war in this country, a war against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young and the very old, and even many in the middle class of our society" and had "broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during a period of growth and progress." In fact, the class war was underway in the latter days of the pre-war New Deal years, but it was not yet one-sided, since a vigorous labor movement existed — the target of bitter and increasingly one-sided class war in the postwar years.

In Europe, the attack on democracy is amplified by the strongly undemocratic institutions of the European Union. Major decisions over policy are made by the unelected Troika — European Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Central Bank — with the northern banks right at their shoulders. The population has little to say, and knows it — a large reason for the general collapse of the centrist parties that have governed the countries since World War II.

In a very revealing [inquiry](#), economist Mark Weisbrot reviews the reports of the regular IMF consultations with member governments of the European Union. He discovered "a remarkably consistent and disturbing pattern." The financial crisis was exploited as an opportunity to lock in the neoliberal reforms: spending cuts in the public sector rather than tax increases, reduced benefits and public services, cuts in health care, undermining of collective bargaining, and in general, moves to create a society "with less bargaining power for labor and lower wages, more inequality and poverty, a smaller government and social safety nets, and measures that reduce growth and employment."

"The IMF papers," Weisbrot concludes, "detail the agenda of Europe's decision-makers, and they have accomplished quite a bit of it over the past five years." The agenda is quite familiar in the US and in fact, wherever the neoliberal assault has proceeded.

In England, Thatcher-Major and Blair's New Labour, followed by Tory austerity,

had similar effects. The Corbyn movement is an encouraging reaction, bitterly opposed by the Labour establishment and most of the media.

The other cases mentioned have their own special features.

Putin seems to have been genuinely [popular](#) throughout his tenure. Crimeans, it appears, [support](#) the takeover by Russia. There seemed to be possibilities for social democratic developments in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, possibly even for mutually supportive linkages to social democratic Europe. Such hopes were dashed by the harsh effects of the US-backed market reforms, which devastated the economy and led to millions of deaths, along with opening the way for immense corruption as oligarchs took over state assets. Putin was seen by the public as a corrective to the neoliberal disaster and the decline of Russia on the world scene. Authoritarian no doubt, often brutal, but, it seems, popular.

In Israel, too, the right-wing nationalist-religious coalition is genuinely popular. Threats to Netanyahu are primarily from his right. This is quite a change from the time when Israel conquered Palestinian lands in the 1967, and soon set forth on its illegal settlement programs. The change was predicted early on by those who understood the natural dynamics of crushing people under your jackboot. One commentator who was particularly outspoken was the respected Israeli sage Yeshayahu Leibowitz. He condemned the occupation bitterly, not because of concern for the Palestinians, for whose fate he expressed only contempt, but because of the predictable effect on Jews, who, he warned, would become “Judeo-Nazis” as they carried out the tasks of repression and displacement.

The signs by now are dramatic, both in actions and in legislation, both with regard to the criminal acts in the occupied territories and the shift to unconcealed racism at home. The occupied territories include Gaza, despite Israel’s claim to the contrary, which is not even accepted by its loyal US supporter. In the full knowledge that the home of 2 million people is likely to become literally “unlivable” within a few years, as international monitors have predicted, Israel maintains its stranglehold, designed officially to keep the population on a “diet” while the self-described “most moral army in the world” pounds away with atrocities that are appalling the world.

Turkey, too, is a special case, with a long and complex history since the current Turkish state took form after World War I. Keeping to recent times, in the ‘90s,

Turkey was the scene of some of the worst atrocities of the period during the state terror campaign against the Kurds. Tens of thousands were killed, thousands of towns and villages were destroyed, hundreds of thousands — maybe millions — were driven from their homes, some now barely surviving in abandoned buildings in Istanbul. The main support for the state crimes was Washington: Clinton provided 80 percent of the arms in an increasing flow as atrocities increased. Little was reported even though the major press had bureaus in Turkey, of course. Much of the information available comes from the detailed reports of the outstanding researcher for Human Rights Watch, Jonathan Sugden — so outstanding that he was finally expelled by the government. Particularly significant were a remarkable group of Turkish intellectuals — leading writers, artists, journalists, publishers and others — who not only protested the crimes, but undertook civil disobedience, facing and sometimes enduring long and severe punishment. I know of no group like them anywhere.

By the turn of the century, the situation was improving, soon quite considerably, including the early Erdoğan years. But soon regression began under his leadership, and it has become extremely severe. Turkey held the worst record in the world for persecuting journalists, and the repression has extended to academics and many others. Vicious attacks on Kurdish areas have increased. The country is divided between a secular liberal-left sector and a deeply religious, mostly rural population. A dedicated Islamist, Erdoğan has rallied support among this sector and is relying on it to create a harsh and repressive authoritarian state with strong Islamist elements. What is happening is particularly painful to observe, not just because of the crimes, but because of the hopeful prospects that were lying ahead only a few years ago and the fact that Turkey could serve as a valuable bridge, culturally as well as economically, between West and East.

Hungary is another special case. It is a cultural/linguistic island, which has had remarkable cultural achievements and also an ugly record of fascism and cooperation with the Nazis. From what I have read — I have no close knowledge — the country has long been obsessed with the fear of decline, even disappearance — fears exacerbated by the passage of refugees through Hungary to Western Europe. The population is declining, partly from low fertility, partly from a large exodus to the West. Orbán has exploited these fears to construct an “illiberal democracy” dedicated to “saving Hungary” and “traditional values,” with the usual xenophobic and racist elements of [such appeals](#).

There's a good deal more to say about racism in Europe, not visible when the populations are highly homogenous, but quickly apparent as soon as there is any "contamination" by those who are a bit different. And there is no need to comment on the history of the Jews, and of the Roma right to the present.

Speaking of authoritarian leaders, I've been dumbfounded by the US political establishment's reaction to Trump's handling of the Helsinki summit with Putin. What's wrong with the idea of the US and Russia working together to address major international issues facing the world today, including the threat of nuclear weapons? What's your own reaction to this matter? Was Trump wrong? Was he being "anti-American"?

There's surely nothing wrong with the US and Russia seeking rapprochement and cooperation on such issues. It is essential for hopes for a better future, even survival. Russia should not refuse to deal with the US and (were it imaginable) impose sanctions on the US and UK because they invaded and devastated Iraq with all of the hideous regional consequences, or (with France) destroyed Libya with terrible effects from West Africa to the Levant, along with other crimes too numerous to mention. Or conversely (putting aside the scale of crimes).

There are numerous issues on which the countries must cooperate, and sometimes do, as in Syria to avoid clashes that could set off war. The needs are far greater at the Russian border, where, as a result of NATO expansion and build-up of forces, accidents with indescribable consequences could easily occur. There are many other cases where serious interchange is necessary. On nuclear issues, even more so. As we've discussed elsewhere, Obama's programs of modernization of nuclear weapons increased "killing power" sufficiently to create "exactly what one would expect to see, if a nuclear-armed state were planning to have the capacity to fight and win a nuclear war by disarming enemies with a surprise first strike," as explained in an important [study](#) in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Trump's nuclear programs enhance the threat even beyond, with new and very dangerous weapons systems and severe lowering of the threshold for nuclear war — an existential threat to Russia, and the world; even the attacker would be devastated by a first-strike. Under George W. Bush, the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, another serious threat to Russia. Russian weapons initiatives and reactions also enhance the threat of terminal destruction.

Turning to Trump, his actions make no sense at all if they are guided by some geopolitical strategy. On the one hand, he is talking politely with Putin (some say genuflecting) and calling for reduction of tensions, while on the other hand, he is significantly escalating tensions and threats. The nuclear program just mentioned is one very serious example. He is also sending arms to Ukraine and increasing NATO forces and operations on the Russian border — actions that any Russian leader would regard as a severe threat. Harsher sanctions have been imposed on Russia, which is by no means unaware of the increasing threats – how could they be? The business press, citing US Treasury reports, [observes](#) that Russia is “liquidating dollar assets at a record pace, selling four-fifths of its cache of U.S. government debt, \$81 billion worth, over a two-month period” in order to safeguard assets in case relations continue to deteriorate.

While Trump’s policies make no sense from a geostrategic perspective, they fall into place on the assumption that he is continuing to pursue his “[Me First](#)” agenda, damn the consequences for the world, matters we’ve discussed before. The agenda requires maintaining the loyalty of his base and ensuring that they will remain loyal if the Mueller investigation comes up with something that damages him. The centerpiece of his press conference with Putin, bitterly condemned by elite opinion, was his effort to discredit Mueller. The tactic is succeeding quite well. A large majority of Republicans approve of the way Trump dealt with Putin, and [polls](#) show that Mueller’s public image is at an all-time low.

Meanwhile, the sharp escalation and threats satisfy the national security hawks.

The latter constitute a broad spectrum. While it is sometimes hard to believe, we cannot overlook the fact that the most highly regarded moderates firmly uphold doctrines that are, quite literally, too outlandish to discuss. For example, Richard Haass, a respected scholar and diplomat and long-time president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, [instructs us](#) with a straight face that “International order for 4 centuries has been based on non-interference in the internal affairs of others and respect for sovereignty. Russia has violated this norm by seizing Crimea and by interfering in the 2016 US election. We must deal [with] Putin’s Russia as the rogue state it is.”

Words fail.

In Israel, a controversial bill about the “Jewish nation-state” was just passed that

makes no mention of minority rights. Is there something new behind the passing of this bill that wasn't always a reality from Israel's standpoint of view?

Regrettably, within Israel itself, the new nationality law of July 2018 was not very controversial, though it has appalled liberal opinion throughout the world. Rather typical is what is happening in the US, which since the 1967 war, has been Israel's leading supporter. For a long period, Israel was the darling of liberal and progressive opinion. By today, [that has changed considerably](#). "According to a Pew Research Center survey in April [2018], self-described liberal Democrats were twice as likely to sympathize with Palestinians over Israel than they were only two years ago. Forty percent of liberals sympathized more with Palestinians, the most since 2001, while 33 percent sympathized more with Israel."

Support for Israel has shifted to the ultranationalist right and Christian evangelicals — many of whom combine passionate support for Israel with the doctrine that the Second Coming, perhaps very soon, will consign all Jews to the torments of eternal perdition apart from a very few who will find Christ in time — a level of anti-Semitism unmatched even in Nazi Germany.

Israel is well aware that it is losing support among sectors of world opinion that have at least some concern for human and civil rights. It is therefore seeking to expand its base of support to the East, primarily to China and India, the latter becoming a very natural ally for a number of reasons, including the drift in both societies toward ultranationalism, reactionary internal policies and hatred of Islam. It is also firming up what have been tacit alliances with the most reactionary and brutal Arab states, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, joined now by Egypt under the current harsh military dictatorship.

The new nationality law declares Israel to be the nation-state of the Jewish people, downgrades the status of Arabic and formally authorizes Jewish-only communities. It does break some new ground, but not very much. What is new is primarily the elevation of these racist principles to the Basic Law — constitutional status. Long ago, Israel's highest court determined that Israel is "the sovereign state of the Jewish people" ... but not the state of its 20 percent non-Jewish citizens, essentially the same doctrine.

One of the few articulate critics of the new law, the fine Israeli writer Yitzhak Laor, [reminds us](#) that in debates on the Land Law of 1960, Zerach Warhaftig, a

founder of the National Religious Party and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, declared that, "We wish it to be clear that the land of Israel belongs to the nation of Israel. *Nation of Israel* is a wider concept than the nation that lives in Zion, because the nation of Israel is found in the entire world.... [In this new law] there is a very great judicial novelty: we are giving a legal cover to the regulations of the Keren Kayemet leYisrael [Jewish National Fund, or JNF]" (translated from Hebrew).

The JNF regulations in turn obligate the organization to work for the benefit of "persons of Jewish race, religion, or origin." It may be added that these radical violations of civil rights are funded by American taxpayers thanks to the tax-free status of the JNF as a charitable organization.

Warhaftig was quite right almost 60 years ago. An array of legal and administrative rules was established to ensure that the JNF would have authority over all state lands – 93 percent of the territory of the country – hence, authority to ensure that lands would be reserved for Jews alone, with minor and derisory exceptions. Details are spelled out and documented in my *Towards a New Cold War* (1982).

Laor reminds us that since the law was established, "700 settlements were established, all for Jews, apart from a few cities for [displaced] Bedouins (which merit ridicule)." Meanwhile, the 20 percent non-Jewish minority has been restricted to the 2 percent of the land allotted to them when the state was established 70 years ago.

In 2000, the racist land administration arrangements finally reached Israel's High Court. It issued a narrow ruling that granted the petitioners, a professional Arab couple, the right to move to the all-Jewish town of Katzir. Very soon, arrangements began to be contrived to get around the law, but now it is no longer necessary, since segregation is legally authorized by the Basic Law.

Much of this should be familiar to Americans. New Deal public housing projects were restricted to whites by laws that remained in effect until the late 1960s, when it was too late to help African Americans because the postwar years of rapid and egalitarian growth, which offered them some opportunities, were coming to an end, and the neoliberal assault was soon to come, imposing stagnation. Another grim chapter in the history of racism in America.

Also familiar to Americans is US isolation in support of such measures (with the attractive exceptions noted earlier), now reaching new levels in the Trump administration. In the last days of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, Reagan was alone in the world in supporting it, even denying the existence of Apartheid, even after Thatcher and Israel had abandoned the sinking ship. We might also recall that during the last throes of Apartheid, in 1988, the Reagan administration declared Nelson Mandela's African National Congress to be "one of the more notorious terrorist groups" in the world. While greatly honored internationally, Mandela remained on the US terrorist list until 2008, when at last a congressional resolution allowed him to enter the "land of the free" without special dispensation.

Often, there is indeed little new under the sun.

The World Bank continues to support authoritarian regimes throughout the Global South by providing funds and bailouts. How can the UN and Western democratic governments tolerate such a stance on the part of the World Bank?

Unfortunately, the answer is all too clear. As their own practice consistently illustrates, the "Western democratic governments" pursue similar policies with enthusiasm. It should be superfluous to illustrate, but since we live in an atmosphere of self-celebration, it might be useful to consider at least one example. Take the Congo, which should be one of the richest and most advanced countries of the world, with huge resources and no threats — from its neighbors, that is. When Europe was despoiling Africa, the Congo was the domain of King Leopold of Belgium, whose hideous crimes surpassed even the normal standards of the "enlightened" West. He didn't pass without censure. In the famous 11th edition of the *Britannica*, the article on the monarch lauds his achievements, but does add a phrase at the end saying that he treated his subjects harshly — slaughtering millions and ordering atrocious tortures to gain more rubber for his overflowing coffers.

"The horror, the horror" finally came to end in 1960, when Congo declared independence. Its leading figure was the young charismatic Patrice Lumumba, who might have extricated Congo from the misery of colonialism. But it was not to be. The CIA was assigned the task of murdering him, but the Belgians got there first, and together with other liberal democracies, helped plunge Congo back to terror and destruction under the leadership of the Western favorite, the

murderous kleptomaniac Mobutu, who ensured that the riches of the Congo would flow in the right direction. Fast forwarding to today, all of those who enjoy smart phones and other technical delights benefit from the rich minerals of Eastern Congo, handed over to the multinationals hovering nearby by warring militias and marauders from US-backed Rwanda while the death toll mounts to many millions.

That Western democracies should tolerate support for authoritarian regimes is not much of a mystery.

What do you think will take to halt the spread of political authoritarianism across the globe?

The familiar advice, easy to state, hard to follow, but if there's another way, it's been kept a dark secret: honest, dedicated, courageous and persistent engagement, ranging from education and organization to direct activism, carefully honed for effectiveness under prevailing circumstances. Hard work, necessary work, the kind that has succeeded in the past and can again.

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



CJ

Polychroniou

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, 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 several 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 Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [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.