



SOCIAL JUSTICE CLASS DEMOCRACY

“The Class War Never Ends, the Master Never Relents”: An Interview With Noam Chomsky

David Barsamian talks to Noam Chomsky about fighting for a better future in dark times.

By David Barsamian and Noam Chomsky.

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Noam Chomsky addresses the audience at the National Autonomous University’s Educational Investigation Institute in Mexico City. (*Jorge Dan / Reuters*)

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article originally appeared at [TomDispatch.com](https://tomdispatch.com). To stay on top of important articles like these, [sign up](#) to receive the latest updates from TomDispatch.com.*

As I was reading today's interview between David Barsamian of [Alternative Radio](#) and the remarkable Noam Chomsky, now [93 years old](#) and still so much in and of our world, I had a "memory" flash of sorts. I wondered what, in his 20s, Tom Engelhardt would have thought of this ever more extreme planet if, as in one of the sci-fi novels he then read so avidly, he had been transported more than half a century into the future to this very America. And you know exactly the country I mean.

Admittedly, that Tom didn't consider 1960s America—above all, his country's horrific war in Vietnam—anything to brag about. Still, how would he feel to find himself in a land where [most of the members](#) of one major party believe, based on nothing, that the last presidential election was quite literally "stolen"; a country increasingly filled with extremist militias; one that spent four years with a mad and maddening president with, it seems, every intention of facing off one more time against a Joe Biden who, [in 2024](#), will be 82 years old. We're talking about a candidate who, were he to win—or even somehow claim a lost election as his—could turn the US into a proto-fascist state. (Honestly, speaking of the past, why didn't all those [Big Macs and Wendy's burgers](#) take him down?)

And that, of course, would just be an introduction to a planet on which—forget the war still going on in Ukraine amid [increasing fears](#) that Russian President Vladimir Putin might consider using nuclear weapons for the first time since

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were taken out in 1945—week by week, month by month, the news only gets worse. It matters little whether you're speaking about record droughts, fires, floods, storms, melting ice, rising sea levels, you name it, since these days it seems as if no horror we might dream up couldn't become reality.



In such a context, let me introduce the young Tom Engelhardt to the four horsemen of the apocalypse of the 21st century and leave it to Noam Chomsky, interviewed by the superb David Barsamian for their new book, Notes on Resistance, to tell us where, in such a world, hope might still lie.

—Tom Engelhardt

DAVID BARSAMIAN: What we are facing is often described as unprecedented—a pandemic, climate catastrophe and, always lurking off center stage, nuclear annihilation. Three of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

NOAM CHOMSKY: I can add a fourth: the impending destruction of what remains of American democracy and the shift of the United States toward a deeply authoritarian, also proto-fascist, state, when the Republicans come back into office, which looks likely. So that's four horses.

And remember that the Republicans are the denialist party, committed to racing to climate destruction with abandon in the hands of the chief wrecker they now worship like a demigod. It's bad news for the United States and for the world, given the power of this country.

DB: The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance just issued the Global State of Democracy Report 2021. It says that the United States is a country where democracy is “backsliding.”

NC: Very severely. The Republican Party is openly dedicated—it's not even concealed—to undermining what remains of American democracy. They're working very hard on it. Since the days of Richard Nixon, the Republicans have long understood that they're fundamentally a minority party and not going to get votes by advertising their increasingly open commitment to the welfare of the ultrarich and the corporate sector. So they've been long diverting attention to so-called cultural issues.

It began with Nixon's Southern strategy. He realized that Democratic Party support for civil rights legislation, however limited, would lose them the Southern Democrats, who were openly and overtly extreme racists. The Nixon

administration capitalized on that with their Southern strategy, hinting, not so subtly, that the Republicans would become the party of white supremacy.

In subsequent years, they picked up other issues. It's now the virtual definition of the party: So let's run on attacking "critical race theory"—whatever that means! It's a cover term, as their leading spokesmen have explained, for everything they can rally the public on: white supremacy, racism, misogyny, Christianity, anti-abortion rights.

Meanwhile, the leadership, with the aid of the right-wing Federalist Society, has been developing legal means—if you want to call it that—for the Republicans to ensure that, even as a minority party, they will be able to control the voting apparatus and the outcome of elections. They are exploiting radically undemocratic features built into the constitutional system and the structural advantages Republicans have as a party representing more scattered rural populations and the traditionally Christian, white nationalist population. Using such advantages, even with a minority of the vote, they should be able to maintain something like near-permanent power.

Actually, that permanence might not last long if Donald Trump, or a Trump clone, takes the presidency in 2024. It's not likely then that the United States, not to speak of the world, will be able to escape the impact of the climate and environmental destruction they're committed to accelerating.

DB: We all saw what happened in Washington on January 6th. Do you see the possibility of civil unrest spreading? There are multiple militias across the country. Representative Paul Gosar, of the great state of Arizona, and Representative Lauren Boebert, of the great state of Colorado, among others, have made threatening statements inciting violence and hatred. The Internet is rife with conspiracy theories. What must we do?

NC: It is very serious. In fact, maybe a third or so of Republicans think it may be necessary to use force to “save our country,” as they put it. “Save our country” has a clear meaning. If anyone didn’t understand it, Trump issued a call to people to mobilize to prevent the Democrats from swamping this country with criminals being let out of jails in other lands, lest they “replace” white Americans and carry out the destruction of America. The “great replacement” theory—that’s what “take away our country” means and it’s being used effectively by proto-fascist elements, Trump being the most extreme and most successful.

What can we do about it? The only tools available, like it or not, are education and organization. There’s no other way. It means trying to revive an authentic labor movement of the kind that, in the past, was in the forefront of moves toward social justice. It also means organizing other popular movements, carrying out educational efforts to combat the murderous anti-vaccine campaigns now going on, making sure that there are serious efforts to deal with the climate crisis, mobilizing against the bipartisan commitment to increase dangerous military spending and provocative actions against China, which could lead to a conflict nobody wants and end up in a terminal war.

You just have to keep working on this. There is no other way.

DB: In the background is extreme inequality, which is off the charts. Why is the United States so unequal?,

NC: A lot of this has happened in the last 40 years as part of the neoliberal assault on America in which the Democrats, too, have participated, though not to the extent of the Republicans.

There is a fairly careful estimate of what's called the transfer of wealth from the lower 90 percent of the population to the top 1 percent (actually, a fraction of them) during the four decades of this assault. A RAND Corporation study estimated it as close to \$50 trillion. That's not pennies—and it's ongoing.

During the pandemic, the measures that were taken to save the economy from collapse led to the further enrichment of the very few. They also sort of maintained life for so many others, but the Republicans are busy trying to dismantle that part of the deal, leaving only the part that enriches the very few. That's what they're dedicated to.

Take ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council. This goes back years. It's an organization funded by almost the entire corporate sector, dedicated to hitting at the weak point in the constitutional system, the states. It's very easy. It doesn't take much to buy or impel legislative representatives at the state level, so ALEC has worked there to impose legislation that will foster the long-term efforts of those seeking to destroy democracy, increase radical inequality, and destroy the environment.

And one of the most important of those efforts is to get the states to legislate that they can't even investigate—and certainly not punish—wage theft, which steals billions of dollars from workers every year by refusing to pay overtime as well as through other devices. There have been efforts to investigate it, but the business sector wants to stop them.

An analog at the national level is the attempt to ensure that the IRS not go after wealthy corporate tax cheats. At every level you can think of, this class war on the part of the masters, the corporate sector, the super-rich is raging with intensity. And they're going to use every means they can to ensure that it goes on until they've succeeded in destroying not only American democracy, but the very possibility of survival as an organized society.

DB: Corporate power seems unstoppable. The über class of gazillionaires—Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk—are now flying into outer space. But I'm reminded of something that the novelist Ursula K. Le Guin said some years ago: "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable." And then she added, "So did the divine right of kings."

NC: So did slavery. So did the principle that women are property, which lasted in the United States until the 1970s. So did laws against miscegenation so extreme that even the Nazis wouldn't accept them, which lasted in the United States until the 1960s.

All kinds of horrors have existed. Over time, their power has been eroded but never completely eliminated. Slavery was abolished, but its remnants remain in new and vicious forms.

It's not slavery, but it's horrifying enough. The idea that women are not persons has not only been formally overcome, but to a substantial extent in practice, too. Still, there's plenty to do. The constitutional system was a step forward in the 18th century. Even the phrase "We the people" terrified the autocratic rulers of Europe, deeply concerned that the evils of democracy (what was then called republicanism) could spread and undermine civilized life. Well, it did spread—and civilized life continued, even improved.

So, yes, there are periods of regression and of progress, but the class war never ends, the masters never relent. They're always looking for every opportunity and, if they're the only participants in class struggle, we will indeed have regression. But they don't have to be, any more than in the past.

DB: In your Masters of Mankind book, you have an essay, "Can Civilization Survive Really Existing Capitalism?" You write, "Really existing capitalist democracy—RECD for short (pronounced 'wrecked') is "radically incompatible" with democracy and add that "it seems to me unlikely that civilization can survive really existing capitalism and the sharply attenuated democracy that goes along with it. Could functioning democracy make a difference? Consideration of nonexistent systems can only be speculative, but I think there's some reason to think so." Tell me your reasons.

NC: First of all, we live in this world, not in some world we would like to imagine. And in this world, if you simply think about the timescale for dealing with environmental destruction, it's far shorter than the time that would be

necessary to carry out the significant reshaping of our basic institutions. That doesn't mean you have to abandon the attempt to do so. You should be doing that all the time—working on ways to raise consciousness, raise understanding, and build the rudiments of future institutions in the present society.

At the same time, the measures to save us from self-destruction will have to take place within the basic framework of existing institutions—some modification of them without fundamental change. And it can be done. We know how it can be done.

Meanwhile, work should continue on overcoming the problem of RECD, really existing capitalist democracy, which in its basic nature is a death sentence and also deeply inhuman in its fundamental properties. So, let's work on that, and at the same time, ensure that we save the possibility of achieving it by overcoming the immediate and urgent crisis we face.

DB: Talk about the importance of independent progressive media like Democracy Now! and Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting. And may I say, Alternative Radio? Publishers like Verso, Haymarket, Monthly Review, City Lights, and The New Press. Magazines like Jacobin, The Nation, The Progressive, and In These Times. Online magazines like TomDispatch, The Intercept, and ScheerPost. Community radio stations like KGNU, WMNF, and KPDK. How important are they in countering the dominant corporate narrative?

NC: What else is going to counter it? They are the ones holding up the hope that we'll be able to find ways to counter these highly harmful, destructive developments we're discussing.

The core method is, of course, education. People have to come to understand what's happening in the world. That requires the means to disseminate information and analysis, opening up opportunities for discussion, which you're not going to find, for the most part, in the mainstream. Maybe occasionally at the margins. A lot of what we've been talking about is not discussed at all, or only marginally within the major media. So, these conversations have to be brought to the public through such channels. There is no other way.

Actually, there is another way: organization. It is possible and, in fact, easy to conduct educational and cultural programs inside organizations. That was one of the major contributions of the labor movement when it was a vibrant, lively institution, and one of the main reasons why President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were so determined to destroy labor, as they both did. Their first moves were attacks on the labor movement.

There were educational and cultural programs that brought people together to think about the world, to understand it, and develop ideas. It takes organization to do that. Doing that alone, as an isolated person, is extremely difficult.

Despite the corporate effort to beat back the unions, there was a lively, independent labor press in the United States as late as the 1950s, reaching lots of people, condemning the "bought priesthood," as they called it, of the mainstream press. It took a long time to destroy that.

There's a history in the United States of a vibrant, progressive labor press that goes back to the nineteenth century, when it was a major phenomenon. That can and should be revived as part of the revival of a militant, functioning labor movement at the forefront of progress toward social justice. It happened before and it can happen again. And independent media are a critical element of this.

When I was a kid in the 1930s and early 1940s, I could read Izzy Stone in the *Philadelphia Record*. It wasn't the major journal in Philadelphia, but it was there. In the late 1940s, I could read him in the New York newspaper *PM*, which was an independent journal. It made a huge difference.

Later, the only way to read Stone was to subscribe to his newsletter. That was the independent media in the 1950s. In the 1960s, it began to pick up a little bit with the magazine *Ramparts*, radio programs like Danny Schechter's on WBCN in Boston, and others like it.

And today, this continues around the country. The ones you mentioned are forces for independence, for thinking.

DB: There are multiple mentions of Antonio Gramsci in two of your most recent books, *Consequences of Capitalism* and *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal*—specifically, of his comment, “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Right now, though, the quote of his I'd like you to address is: “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” Talk about his relevance today and the meaning of that quote.

NC: Gramsci was a leading left labor activist in Italy around the late teens, early 1920s. He was very active in organizing left worker collectives. In Italy, the fascist government took over in the early 1920s. One of its first acts was to send Gramsci to prison. During his trial, the prosecutor stated: We have to silence this voice. (This gets us back to the importance of independent media, of course.) So, he was sent to prison.

While there, he wrote his *Prison Notebooks*. He wasn't silenced, though the public couldn't read him. He continued the work he had begun, and in that writing were the quotes you cited.

In the early 1930s, he wrote that the old world was collapsing, while the new world had not yet risen and that, in the interim, they were facing morbid symptoms. Mussolini was one, Hitler another. Nazi Germany almost conquered large parts of the world. We came very close to that. The Russians defeated Hitler. Otherwise, half the world would probably have been run by Nazi Germany. But it was very close. Morbid symptoms were visible everywhere.

The adage you quoted, "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," which became famous, came from the period when he was still able to publish. In his spirit, we must look at the world reasonably, without illusions, understand it, decide how to act, and recognize that there are grim portents. There are very dangerous things happening. That's pessimism of the intellect. At the same time, we need to recognize that there are ways out, real opportunities. So, we have optimism of the will, meaning, we dedicate ourselves to

using all the opportunities available—and they do exist—while working to overcome the morbid symptoms and move toward a more just and decent world.

DB: In these dark times, it's difficult for many to feel that there's a bright future ahead. You're always asked, what gives you hope? And I have to ask you the same question.

NC: One thing that gives me hope is that people are struggling hard under very severe circumstances, much more severe than we can imagine, all over the world to achieve rights and justice. They don't give up hope, so we certainly can't.

The other is that there's simply no option. The alternative is to say, OK, I'll help the worst to happen. That's one choice. The other is to say, I'll try to do the best I can, what the farmers in India are doing, what poor and miserable peasants in Honduras are doing, and many others like them around the world. I'll do that as best I can. And maybe we can get to a decent world in which people can feel that they can live without shame. A better world.

That's not much of a choice, so we should be able to easily make it.

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Noam Chomsky Noam Chomsky, Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona and Institute Professor emeritus at MIT, has written many books and articles on international affairs, in particular on Israel and Palestine.

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