

Cox, S. (2021, October 29). A livable future is possible: An interview with Noam Chomsky.

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"The longer we wait, the more we'll betray our children and our grandchildren. Those are the choices."

This month will mark a critical juncture in the struggle to avoid climate catastrophe. At the COP26 global climate summit kicking off next week in Glasgow, Scotland, negotiators will be faced with the urgent need to get the world economy off the business-as-usual track that will take Earth up to and beyond 3 degrees Celsius of excess heating before this century's end, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Yet, so far, the pledges of rich nations to cut greenhouse-gas emissions have been far too weak to rein in the temperature rise. Meanwhile, the Biden administration's climate plans hang in the balance. If Congress fails to pass the reconciliation bill, the next opportunity for the United States to take effective climate action may not arise until it's too late.

For the past several decades, Noam Chomsky has been one of the most forceful and persuasive voices confronting injustice, inequity, and the threat posed by human-caused climate chaos to civilization and Earth. I was eager to know Professor Chomsky's views on the roots of our current dire predicament and on humanity's prospects for emerging from this crisis into a livable future. He very graciously agreed to speak with me by way of a video chat. The text here is an abridged version of a conversation we had on October 1, 2021.

Professor Chomsky, now 92, is the author of numerous best-selling political works, translated into scores of languages. His critiques of power and advocacy on behalf of the political agency of the common person have inspired generations of activists and organizers. He has been institute professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology since 1976. His most recent books are *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance*, with Marv Waterstone, and *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet*, with Robert Pollin and C.J. Polychroniou.

—Stan Cox

Stan Cox: Most of the nations that will be meeting in Glasgow for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference on October 31 to November 12, 2021, have made emissions-reduction pledges. For the most part, those pledges are wholly inadequate. What principles do you think should guide the effort to prevent climate catastrophe?

Noam Chomsky: The initiators of the Paris Agreement intended to have a binding treaty, not voluntary agreements, but there was an impediment. It's called the Republican Party. It was clear that the Republican Party would never accept any binding commitments. The Republican organization, which has lost any pretense of being a normal political party, is almost solely dedicated to the welfare of the superrich and the corporate sector, and cares absolutely nothing about the population or the future of the world. The Republican organization would never have accepted a treaty. In response, the organizers reduced their goal to a voluntary agreement, which has all the difficulties that you mentioned.

We've lost six years, four under the Trump administration which was openly dedicated to maximizing the use of fossil fuels and dismantling the regulatory apparatus that, to some extent, had limited their lethal effects. To some extent, these regulations protected sectors of the population from pollution, mostly the poor and people of color. But they're the ones who, of course, face the main burden of pollution. It's the poor people of the world who live in what Trump called "shithole countries" that suffer the most; they have contributed the least to the disaster, and they suffer the worst.

It doesn't have to be this way. As you write in your new book, *The Path to a Liveable Future*, there is indeed a path to a livable future. There are ways to have responsible, sane, and racially just policies. It's up to all of us to demand them, something young people around the world are already doing.

Other countries have their own things to answer for, but the United States has one of the worst records in the world. The United States blocked the Paris Agreement before Trump eventually got into office. But it was under Trump's instructions that the United States pulled out of the agreement altogether.

If you look over at the more sane Democrats, who are far from guiltless, there are people called moderates like Senator Joe Manchin (D–WV), the leading recipient of fossil-fuel funding, whose position is that of the fossil-fuel companies, which is, as he put it, no elimination, just innovation. That's ExxonMobil's view, too: "Don't worry, we'll take care of you," they say. "We're a soulful corporation. We're investing in some futuristic ways to remove from the atmosphere the pollution that we're pouring into it. Everything's fine, just trust us." No

elimination, just innovation, which may or may not come, and if it does, it will probably be too late and too limited.

Take the IPCC report that just appeared. It was much more dire than previous ones and said we must eliminate fossil fuels step by step, every year, and be free of them completely within a few decades. A few days after the report was released, Joe Biden issued a plea to the OPEC oil cartel to increase production, which would lower gas prices in the United States and improve his position with the population. There was immediate euphoria in the petroleum journals. There's lots of profit to be made, but at what expense? It was nice to have the human species for a couple of hundred thousand years, but evidently that's long enough. After all, the average lifespan of a species on Earth is apparently around 100,000 years. So why should we break the record? Why organize for a just future for all when we can trash the planet helping rich corporations get richer?

SC: Ecological catastrophe is closing in on us largely because, as you once put it, “the entire socioeconomic system is based on production for profit and a growth imperative that cannot be sustained.” However, it seems that only state authority can implement the necessary changes in ways that are equitable, fair, and just. Given the emergency we face, do you think that the US government would be able to justify imposing national-resource constraints like rules for resource allocation or fair-shares rationing, policies that would necessarily limit the freedom of local communities and individuals in their material lives?

NC: Well, we have to face some realities. I would like to see a move towards a more free and just society—production for need rather than production for profit, working people able to control their own lives instead of subordinating themselves to masters for almost their entire waking life. The time required for succeeding at such efforts is simply too great for addressing this crisis. That means we need to solve this within the framework of existing institutions, which can be ameliorated.

The economic system of the last 40 years has been particularly destructive. It's inflicted a major assault on most of the population, resulting in a huge growth in inequality and attacks on democracy and the environment.

A livable future is possible. We don't have to live in a system in which the tax rules have been changed so that billionaires pay lower rates than working people. We don't have to live in a form of state capitalism in which the lower 90 percent of income earners have been robbed of approximately \$50 trillion, for the benefit of a fraction of 1 percent. That's the estimate of the RAND Corporation, a serious underestimate if we look at other devices that have been used. There are ways of reforming the existing system within basically the same framework of institutions. I think they ought to change, but it would have to be over a longer timescale.

The question is: Can we prevent climate catastrophe within the framework of less-savage state capitalist institutions? I think there's a reason to believe that we can, and there are very careful, detailed proposals as to how to do it, including ones in your new book, as well as the proposals of my friend and coauthor, economist Robert Pollin, who's worked many of these things out in great detail. Jeffrey Sachs, another fine economist, using somewhat different models, has come to pretty much the same conclusions. These are pretty much along lines of proposals of the International Energy Association, by no means a radical organization, one that grew out of the energy corporations. But they all have essentially the same picture.

There's, in fact, even a congressional resolution by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ed Markey which outlines proposals that are pretty close to this. And I think it's all within the range of feasibility. Their cost estimates of 2 percent to 3 percent of GDP, with feasible efforts, would not only address the crisis, but would create a more livable future, one without pollution, without traffic jams, and with more constructive, productive work, better jobs. All of this is possible.

But there are serious barriers—the fossil-fuel industries, the banks, the other major institutions, which are designed to maximize profit and not care about anything else. After all, that was the announced slogan of the neoliberal period—the economic guru Milton Friedman's pronouncement that corporations have no responsibility to the public or to the workforce, that their total responsibility is to maximize profit for the few.

For public-relations reasons, fossil-fuel corporations like ExxonMobil often portray themselves as soulful and benevolent, working day and night for the benefit of the common good. It's called greenwashing.

SC: Some of the most widely discussed methods for capturing and removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere would consume vast quantities of biomass produced on hundreds of millions or billions of acres, thereby threatening ecosystems and food production, largely in low-income, low-emissions nations. A group of ethicists and other scholars recently wrote that a “core principle” of climate justice is that “the urgent, basic needs of poor people and poor countries ought to be secured

against the effects of climate change and of measures taken to limit” climate change. That would seem to clearly rule out these “emit carbon now, capture it later” plans, and there are other examples of what we might call “climate-mitigation imperialism.” Do you think that the world may be faced with more and more of this sort of exploitation as temperatures rise? And what do you think about these proposals for bioenergy and carbon capture?

NC: It's totally immoral, but it's standard practice. Where does waste go? It doesn't go in your backyard, it goes to places like Somalia that can't protect themselves. The European Union, for example, has been dumping its atomic wastes and other pollution off the coast of Somalia, harming the fishing areas and local industries. It's horrendous.

The latest IPCC report calls for an end to fossil fuels. The hope is that we can avert the worst and reach a sustainable economy within a couple of decades. If we don't do that, we will reach irreversible tipping points and the people most vulnerable—those least responsible for the crisis—will suffer first and most severely from the consequences. People living in the plains of Bangladesh, for example, where powerful cyclones cause extraordinary damage. People living in India, where the temperature can go over 120 degrees Fahrenheit in summer. Many may witness parts of the world becoming unlivable.

There were recent reports by Israeli geoscientists condemning its government for not taking account of the effect of the policies they are pursuing, including developing new gas fields in the Mediterranean. They developed an analysis that indicated that, within a couple of decades, over the summer, the Mediterranean would be reaching the heat of a Jacuzzi, and the low-lying plains would be inundated. People would still live in Jerusalem and Ramallah, but flooding would impact much of the population. Why not change course to prevent this?

SC: The neoclassical economics underlying these injustices lives on in economic climate models known as “integrated assessment models,” which come down to cost-benefit analyses based on the so-called social cost of carbon. With these projections, are economists seeking to gamble away the right of future generations to a decent life?

NC: We have no right to gamble with the lives of the people in South Asia, in Africa, or people in vulnerable communities in the United States. You want to do analyses like that in your academic seminar? OK, go ahead. But don't dare translate it into policy. Don't dare to do that.

There's a striking difference between physicists and economists. Physicists don't say, hey, let's try an experiment that might destroy the world, because it would be interesting to see what would happen. But economists do that. On the basis of neoclassical theories, they instituted a major revolution in world affairs in the early 1980s that took off with Carter and accelerated with Reagan and Thatcher. Given the power of the United States compared with the rest of the world, the neoliberal assault, a major experiment in economic theory, had a devastating result. It didn't take a genius to figure it out. Their motto has been, “Government is the problem.”

That doesn't mean you eliminate decisions; it just means you transfer them. Decisions still have to be made. If they're not made by government, which is, in a limited way, under popular influence, they will be made by concentrations of private power, which have no accountability to the public. And following the Friedman instructions, have no responsibility to the society that gave them the gift of incorporation. They have only the imperative of self-enrichment.

Margaret Thatcher then comes along and says there is no such thing as society, just atomized individuals who are somehow managing in the market. Of course, there is a small footnote that she didn't bother to add: for the rich and powerful, there is plenty of society. Organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, ALEC, all kinds of others. They get together, they defend themselves, and so on. There is plenty of society for them, just not for the rest of us. Most people have to face the ravages of the market. And, of course, the rich don't. Corporations count on a powerful state to bail them out every time there's some trouble. The rich have to have the powerful state—as well as its police powers—to be sure nobody gets in their way.

SC: Where do you see hope?

NC: Young people. In September, there was an international climate strike; hundreds of thousands of young people came out to demand an end to environmental destruction. Greta Thunberg recently stood up at the Davos meeting of the great and powerful and gave them a sober talk on what they're doing. “How dare

you," she said, "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words." You have betrayed us. Those are words that should be seared into everyone's consciousness, particularly people of my generation who have betrayed them and continue to betray the youth of the world and the countries of the world.

We now have a struggle. It can be won, but the longer it's delayed, the more difficult it'll be. If we'd come to terms with this ten years ago, the cost would have been much less. If the US hadn't been the only country to refuse the Kyoto Protocol, it would have been much easier. Well, the longer we wait, the more we'll betray our children and our grandchildren. Those are the choices. I don't have many years; others of you do. The possibility for a just and sustainable future exists, and there's plenty that we can do to get there before it's too late.