



## Noam Chomsky Interview - Effective Ways to Change Politics

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**Thomas Pogge (TP):** The present interview with Professor Noam Chomsky was recorded in his office at the University of Arizona in Tucson on 28 October 2019. The interviewer is Thomas Pogge.

Professor Chomsky, you have spent over 70 years analyzing politics and seeking to change it. Looking back on this time, what do you see as some of your most significant successes and failures?

**Noam Chomsky (NC):** Well, I suppose one success that I never anticipated was in connection with the worst slaughter relative to population since World War 2, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Strongly supported by the United States, the Western powers, it could have stopped at any moment. It looked like a totally hopeless effort went on. There were small number of mostly young people organizing. Finally, after 25 years it was possible to put enough pressure on the United States for the President to do what he could have done for 25 years and just call it off. Not until almost a third of the population had been wiped out. It was one of the most unequal conflicts that I can imagine, a tiny country of 600,000 people fighting off a major power, Indonesia, backed by the United States and European powers. Finally succeeded. That was an unexpected success.

Failures: there are too many to mention. In fact, almost every one failed in some respects. So, for example, I spent a huge amount of time and effort opposing the U.S. wars in Indo-China, was involved in resistance, faced a long jail sentence. Finally, after many years, there was a kind of a settlement, but not until the countries were practically ruined and never recovered. So it's a very partial success, and substantial failure.

There are others which could have had success, but have almost completely failed, like trying to preserve some rights for the Palestinian population under Israeli occupation. That's gotten essentially nowhere. And it's one that shouldn't be hard to resolve. It's been known for many years what the resolution should be, but there's just no way of compelling the United States particularly to take the steps that are required.

But then over the years, domestically, there has been quite a lot of progress. I mean, the civil rights movement had some successes. They were limited but significant. The feminist movement, which I

wasn't particularly involved in, has had substantial success. The environmental movements have gone from non-existent to being of considerable significance.

The movements in other cases, it's kind of a partial success. I was very much involved in the opposition to Reagan's terrorist wars in Central America. The opposition was not only strong but unique in history. This is the first time in the history of imperialism that citizens of the imperial power not only protested (which is rare enough) but actually went to live with the victims to try to help them, to try to provide what protection a white face might give in the face of state terror. Thousands of people from middle America, evangelical churches in rural areas, were very much involved in that. It's hard to know whether it's a success or failure. A couple of hundred thousand people were killed, countries were wrecked and they're barely viable today. But it wasn't like Vietnam. The government was prevented from doing the kinds of things that John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson did with no protest: chemical warfare to destroy crops and livestock, vast ethnic cleansing, driving people into concentration camps, B-52 bombing of heavily populated areas. That wasn't done. Would have been, I think, if it hadn't been for the protests.

In fact, you can, even say the same about the war in Iraq. The war in Iraq, which I've been pretty much involved in, was the first time in the history of imperialism that a major war of aggression was massively protested even before it was officially launched. It took place anyway. It was horrible enough. Many consequences, including ISIS and others. But again, the Bush administration and successors could never dream of doing what the US government did with complete impunity in Indochina for many years.

So what can you say in sum? I can't point to something that's a total success, by any means. There are partial successes. There are failures to achieve what one hoped could have been done.

**TP:** Now, I want to get a little more deeply into what one can learn from the successes and the failures. So, in the last 70 years, we have certainly seen some improvement, as you pointed out. We have also appalling conditions in many other respects, including a lot of poverty, a lot of ecological destruction of our planet, violent conflicts engendering millions of refugees, threats of weapons of mass destruction, other dangerous technologies in the context of a fiercely adversarial state system, and of course, mounting inequality with adverse effects on democracy. There's widespread political and corporate corruption facilitated by a mighty network of tax havens, shell companies, sleazy lawyers, accountants, bankers and financial advisors. And in the face of these large problems and others, we have, of course, practical reason to be optimistic and to tell ourselves and each other that a better world is possible if only we work hard enough to promote it. But if you look at the human world soberly from the standpoint of a seasoned analyst of human affairs, how much chance do you see of a bright future for humanity? How likely is it that humanity will ever realize the kind of decent global political order that we seek and that we believe to be possible?

**NC:** Actually, there a prior question that has to be asked. How much chance is there for a future for humanity, bright or dark? We have to face the fact that, for the first time in human history, decisions that will be made within the next few years will, in fact, determine whether organized human society can survive in any form that we know about.

The environmental crisis is extremely severe. I just happened to read an article a couple of weeks ago by one of the leaders of the *IPCC Report* and *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, the main journal on all these issues, where he starts by saying, let's not mince words. It's time to panic now. We don't have any time to waste. A few years in which we can try to deal with these issues. After that, it's finished.

If you take a look at the other major threat which has been hanging over our heads for 75 years, since August 6th, 1945, a day I'll never forget. If you look at the record, it's just a miracle that we've survived. Unfortunately, the record is not very much known. William Perry, former secretary of defense, recently said that he's terrified, doubly terrified, first by the enormity of the threat that's developing. Secondly, by the fact that there's almost no attention being paid to it.

He could add a third reason to be terrified, namely, that people who understand very well what they're doing are consciously escalating the threat to the point of major disaster. Just take what happened a couple of weeks ago: the Trump administration celebrated Hiroshima Day by pulling out of the INF treaty – the Gorbachev-Reagan Treaty – which did preserve a modicum of peace and stability for 20 years. Short range missiles in Europe could easily explode to massive nuclear war, a terminal war. The Reagan administration was under pressure – this goes back to your earlier question – from very substantial popular mobilization and activism, which laid the basis for making moves towards disarmament. The Trump administration dismantled it and almost pleaded with the Russians to respond by doing the same.

Immediately after pulling out of the agreement, the Pentagon tested a missile. Obviously, long in preparation, which explicitly violated the accords, saying OK, please come along and do it. The military production companies and corporations were just ecstatic. Huge funding for developing new exotic weaponry, hypersonic missiles that there's no way of defending against. They're exulting. They're even thinking beyond to the further contracts that they're going to get to try to find ways to try to prevent the destruction from the systems that they are now developing. We can be certain that the Russians will be doing the same. Probably others. That lowers the threshold for terminal destruction quite significantly.

So we have three reasons to be terrified, expanding on Perry. One, the growing nature of the threat. Two: the almost total lack of attention to it. Three: the conscious, very conscious, escalation of the threat by people who know precisely what they're doing.

And the same is true of environmental catastrophe. The threat is very real. There's a degree of protest developing finally, mostly from young people. But the people who understand precisely what they're doing are racing to escalate the threat. A famous example is Exxon Mobil. It's well researched. Its scientists were in the lead in the 60s and 70s in studying global warming and its catastrophic effects, producing the most advanced papers on the subject. It obviously went to management. And finally, in the late 80s, when the issue began to reach a public audience, mainly with James Hansen's famous speech in 1988, the management did react, namely by pouring money into denialism. Not specific denialism. They didn't want to say things that could be immediately

refuted. But the more clever strategy of just sowing doubt: how do we know? We haven't studied cloud cover?

We can appeal to economists – there are many, including in any corner of the world – who tell us it makes more sense to just let the economies grow and soon then richer societies will be able to take care of it, which is kind of analogous to a man falling off a skyscraper who waves to a friend on the 50th floor and says it is going great, it's always worked in the past. That's the economics profession – a large part of it.

The government, particularly the United States government under Trump, is the arch criminal of human history. Literally. Even Hitler didn't dedicate himself to destroying organized human life. But that's exactly what they're doing and they know it.

So, for example, one of the most astonishing documents, official documents, probably in human history came out about a year ago from one of the Trump bureaucracies, the National Transportation Administration [he means the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration = NHTSA]. The 500-page environmental assessment – very careful, very detailed – predicted that by the end of this century, the temperature would have risen 4 degrees centigrade. That's what the World Bank describes as cataclysmic, what the scientific community says is about twice as high as any hope for organized human life. After reaching this conclusion, they drew a decision. We should do nothing to cut back on automotive emissions. OK? And the argument is quite sound. It's all over anyway, so let's have fun and make profit from the few years ahead. Can you think of anything like that in human history? Anything remotely like that?

But here we come to the triple terrified again. What they describe is terrifying. The response was practically zero. A few articles in the press, then forget about it. And those who know what they're doing are racing ahead to achieve that end. Take, say, the big banks, J.P. Morgan Chase, the biggest bank. Its CEO, Jamie Dimon, knows everything that we do about global warming. He's an educated person. How is he reacting? Pouring money into expanding the fossil fuel extraction, including the most dangerous fossil fuels like Canadian tar sands, knowing exactly what the consequences are. I wouldn't be surprised if in his private life he's supporting the Sierra Club, you know? But in his institutional role, let's race towards disaster because we make profit that way. Exxon Mobil has actually announced that its business program is to maximize fossil fuels, not waste any money on sustainable energy, even though it's profitable, but not as profitable. And they're racing ahead everywhere. Well, that's one part of the world that we face.

The other part of the world is groups like the Extinction Rebellion, Sunrise Movement, which made an actual spectacular achievement as a small group of young people protesting and also acting to try to achieve some gains in climate change. They sat in congressional offices, received some support from some of the young women who recently came into the office, kind of on the swelling wave of the Sanders movement. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez mainly. And they succeeded in putting a Green New Deal on the legislative agenda. Some form of Green New Deal is just a prerequisite for survival. Two years ago, people, if they heard of it, just laughed at it. Now it's on the legislative agenda. There are plans to move forward, maybe not in that form, but in some form.

So there are achievements and there are these two contending forces. They look very unequal, it's kind of like East Timor. One is young people who want to survive, but the other is the major institutions of the society, which want to put more dollars into their overstuffed pockets whether we survive or not. That's fundamentally the conflict. Very unequal one.

But the same is true or even more exaggerated on the nuclear weapons issue because the popular movements are so meager at this point. They were huge in the early 80s, but have dwindled since and there is little knowledge about them. Not many people know anything about the INF treaty or what it means. If you look back, the US claimed that it was pulling out of the treaty because the Russians had violated it. That's reported all over the place. Not reported is the fact that the Russians have claimed for years that the United States was violating. Their claims are taken seriously by American specialists. So again, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* recently had a lead article by one of the leading American specialists on these issues, Theodore Postol, which ran through the Russian claims and argued that they're pretty credible: the ABM installations right on the Russian border, which are already a threat. They were placed there on the ludicrous claim that it's got to defend Europe from Iranian non-existent missiles. Can't even laugh.

But it's very well understood on all sides that ABMs are not a defensive weapon. They're a first strike weapon. It's inconceivable that they could effect a first strike, but conceivably they might limit a retaliatory strike. So, essentially, they're a first strike weapon sitting right on the Russian border. It turns out that, according to Postol's analysis, that the technology in them is basically dual-use. It could easily be modified for offensive weapons and, in fact, that's kind of verified by the recent missile test. Turns out the technology that was used in the recent one in August, violating the INF treaty, does in fact use much of the same technology used in the ABM system.

So here you have two great powers, each of which is arguing that the other has violated a crucial treaty. In a sane world, it's obvious what would happen. They would move towards negotiations and get an outside independent expert to try to see what the facts are and resolve them. It's not our world. In an insane world, which is ours, what they do is: let's break the treaty and try to create more destructive weapons, without anybody paying attention. That's our world. And here, unfortunately, we're back to the second and the third reason to be terrified. Little attention, and the people involved are racing ahead consciously, including the ones who are pretty much respected like Jim Mattis – who resigned from the Trump administration because he couldn't stand their policies any longer and is regarded, almost with reverence, as the one serious adult in the room. He was the one who was behind the new national security strategy, which is virtually insane. I mean, the goal of the national security strategy is to place the United States in a position where it can win two nuclear wars simultaneously against China and Russia. That's beyond insanity. If you had even the beginning of one nuclear war, everybody would be dead just from the effects of a nuclear winter, even those who carried out the first strike. So, we're devoting ourselves to finding a way to destroy the world 50 times over. I mean, it's hard to know what to say about this. And he's respected. Well, that's the problem on the institutional level.

On the human level, the popular level, we do have popular movements, mostly young people – not so much on the nuclear issue. And when you turn to the problems; it's kind of interesting. As you know, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has a Doomsday Clock, which they set every year. Last year they set it is as close as it's ever been to midnight. Two minutes to midnight, which they call the "new abnormal". And they added to the reasons they've used in the past. In the past, it was, of course, the nuclear threat, in recent years the environmental threat. But this time they added a third reason: basically, the deterioration and destruction of democratic forums. Sounds a little different, but it makes sense. That's the only possibility for dealing with the first two issues. And if they decline and deteriorate.... What they talked about particularly was the collapse of information systems, with the flooding of the so-called information systems by purposely false news. Perfect totalitarian technique: flood the information system with so many lies that people don't even know if there's a difference between true and false. So you eliminate the possibility for having rational, deliberative, popular decisions that might confront the problems that we face. And this makes good sense, it's a sensible tactic on the part of those who want to maximize profit and power, don't care what happens in the future, and are perfectly happy to destroy democratic forums.

Actually, that's pretty much implicit in the neo-liberal policies that were instituted a generation ago, Reagan, Thatcher, pretty much everyone since. It doesn't take a genius to have forecast exactly what happened: that would lead to high concentration of wealth. Our concentration. The United States now: 0.1% of the population have over 20% of the wealth. Half the population have negative net worth. That's an immediate consequence of these policies; extreme in the United States for all sorts of reasons, but happening everywhere. Stagnation for the majority. Decline of democracy is almost an immediate corollary from the concentration of wealth which already overwhelmingly influences policy. Even more so with the decline of benefits, leaving people naturally angry, resentful, full of contempt for institutions. You see this in every election: the centrist parties collapse. And that's very fertile territory for demagogues who can try to mobilize populations who are angry and resentful, to try to focus their attention not on the sources of the problem – put that aside – but on scapegoats, people even more vulnerable than they are: immigrants, Muslims, blacks and so on. That's a very dangerous mix. It's the kind of mix that led to the horrors of fascism.

I should say that you said here, I spent 70 years on this, actually 80 years. The first article I wrote in 1939 was on the spread of fascism, which looked inexorable at the time. It's not a very deep insight, a 10-year old picture of it, but it was pretty obvious what was happening. It was right after the fall of Barcelona, which ended the Spanish Republic. Austria had been taken over. Czechoslovakia was taken over. It looked like there was no end. And we're sort of back to that in some ways. Trump is not Hitler by a long shot, doesn't have the ideology or the goals, but listening to his public rallies does bring back memories from childhood of listening to Hitler's Nuremberg rallies over the radio. Not understanding the words but the emotions, the passion. It was frightening to see it again. I think we're moving in that area too, with political and economic which are closely related, moving into very dangerous territory.

Fortunately, again, there is opposition. In the United States, Bernie Sanders and the movement he's helped organize has had a big effect. A large part of the population now really wants to move at

least to traditional social democratic New Deal style policies, which would be a big change. Such big improvement would undermine much of what's happening. And the same is true in Europe. It's going to be a long battle. On almost every front there is this kind of confrontation.

It's not the first time. This is basically class war which goes far back in history, in many other mixtures. It's taken on at the moment a particularly threatening character because of the enormity of the problems that we're facing, and you can't overestimate that. It's literally the case that this generation is going to have to determine whether organized human society persists. It's nothing short of that.

**TP:** Are we going to be able to stop it?

**NC:** Well, let's just go back to my 10-year old prediction. To me, at that point, it looked unstoppable. I didn't know it at the time, of course, but the US government felt pretty much the same. We didn't know then. We know now that in 1939, the State Department and the Council on Foreign Relations – an extra-governmental, mainly corporate, association dealing with foreign affairs – the two of them had set up a study group to try to deal with what would be the post-war world – War & Peace Studies Group, it was called – and very detailed studies are available now. In 1939, they assumed that the United States would end the war very powerful, victorious, that wasn't the question. But they assumed that there would be another great power, the Germans, that the world would be divided between a U.S.-run region and a German-run region. Pretty much what I guessed as a young kid, not knowing anything much. There was in fact the US area, which they called the ground area, which would include of course the Western Hemisphere, the former British Empire – which the US would take over, including the Middle East, of course – and Asia. The Germans would run the rest of Eurasia.

And that lasted pretty much until, first Stalingrad and then the tremendous tank battle in Kursk in 1943, which made it pretty clear that the Russians would defeat the Germans, with the Americans and the British hovering around the periphery, which is pretty much what happened. At that point they switched, and it was still going to be two worlds but with a different enemy.

In fact, the British, particularly Churchill himself, were already thinking about how we could organize a war against Russia. Churchill had an incredible plan, which came from the British military staff to try to save the Wehrmacht and German industry for immediate war against Russia. As soon as the war was over that was knocked down, probably by Roosevelt. But that's the kind of thinking that was going on.

Well, then we go into that era. So, in fact, many of the programs of the War & Peace Studies Group were later formulated in the State Department Policy Planning Bureau and pretty much implemented for many years. That leads us right into the post war world. And it goes on like that. So, as the Soviet Union collapsed, there were illusions that, OK, now we'll have a period of peace, peace dividend, Pentagon budget would be cut back and so on. If anybody had bothered to look at the public documentary record, they would have never thought that for a minute. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, the Bush administration (the first Bush) released, first of all, a new defense

budget, also a security planning document. And these made very interesting reading – nobody looked at them, but they're public. They said basically, we have to keep up the military budget pretty much as before. No Russians. And the reason is – I'm not making this up – because of the technological sophistication of third-world powers. That's why we have to have this immense machine which can blow up the world in five minutes. Did anybody laugh? Nobody even looked.

Then it said we're going to be fighting wars, but these are going to be wars against much weaker enemies. And we have to defeat them quickly and decisively, or it will have a negative impact on us. They talked about the Middle East, the main place where US intervention forces are focused under the Carter doctrine or even before. And they said we have to maintain intervention forces aimed at the Middle East. And then came this interesting phrase, “where the threats to our interests could not be laid at the Kremlin's door”. In other words, “sorry folks, we've been lying to you for 50 years, but it wasn't the Russians at all.” It was what they call radical nationalism, independent nationalism, that doesn't conform to our goals. So that's why we have to keep these intervention forces. Which of course was always true, but every single action for the preceding 60 years had been the Russians are coming. “So, OK, we made a mistake.” It can't be laid at the Kremlin's door now that there's no Kremlin. But we have to keep doing exactly what we're doing.

And this happened almost exactly like that. A couple of weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall [9 November 1989], the US invaded Panama [20 December 1989]. Pretty standard imperial intervention that killed thousands of people, mostly poor people. The goal was to kidnap a guy who was indeed a thug, but a thug who the US introduced: Noriega. He was introduced and supported by the United States; it supported him through fake elections. He made a mistake, he started disobeying orders. OK, we don't take that kind of thing. This is the mafia, after all. Guy starts disobeying orders, cut off his head. So they invaded Panama and managed to kidnap him and take him back to trial and so on, overruled UN veto and resolutions [should be: overruled UN resolutions by veto] and so on. Did anybody care? Right.

A couple of months later [2 August 1990], Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. He actually had a reason to claim that Kuwait was stealing Iraqi oil. Iraq had defended the Arab world against Iran in this long battle, now they were robbing Iraqi oil. OK, not a justification for invasion, but a much more serious argument than the Panama case. His invasion did kill people, according to Human Rights Watch, about 800 people, considerably less than Panama. The US saw an opportunity. Now we can really show our force. Within weeks of the invasion, it fizzles. A lot of fakery about invading Saudi Arabia, you know, and taking over the oil – total fabrication. But within weeks of the invasion it was clear that Saddam understood he had made a mistake. He started making offers to negotiate a withdrawal under some conditions. All of this was known. Actually, there were leaks from the State Department reporting it. The press wouldn't touch it.

I'll tell you a personal anecdote. At that time, I was pretty close to the editors of the *Boston Globe* – most liberal paper in the country at the time – it has since almost disappeared. And I asked them, could I publish an op-ed about the State Department leaks, which indicate that there could be a negotiated settlement. We were quite friendly at the time. They said, yeah you can do it, but you have to do it after the US invades. So, in fact, it did publish the article but right after the invasion

in January [1991]. This is right after the fall of the Soviet Union. Nothing changed. In fact, it's even more extreme.

Couple of days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in El Salvador, an elite battalion – the Atlacatl battalion – which had been responsible for massive atrocities, trained, armed by the United States, just came from renewed training by U.S. special forces. It broke into the Jesuit University, murdered six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and daughter to make sure there would be no witnesses. Turns out this was on the orders of the Salvadoran government, the government that we supported, and which the US embassy was in close contact with. Can anybody remember their names?

I mean, if this had happened in Eastern Europe, there would be massive protests everywhere, you know. But when we murdered six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests. Who knows? This was [on 16 November 1989] a couple of days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nothing, you know. And it's not an isolated incident. This kind of closed off the decade of the 80s, which opened with the murder of an archbishop leading mass, Archbishop Romero [4 March 1980]. Same hands, basically, US supporting it all. Anybody know? I mean, much lesser incidents in Eastern Europe were front page, blaring headlines. So if it happens among enemies multiply it, if we do it ... . You can have case after case like this.

Take Trump's recent betrayal of the Kurds in Syria. Betrayal of the Kurds is practically a qualification for office in the United States. Every president, one after another. Take Ronald Reagan when his friend Saddam Hussein, who the U.S. was supporting, carried out chemical warfare attacks against Iraqi Kurds in Halabja massacre and others – huge atrocities. How did government react? Well, Congress tried to protest and Reagan vetoed it. Reagan and his administration tried to blame it on Iran, protect it from Saddam Hussein. Later, when they wanted to invade Iraq, they brought that up as a reason why we have to invade Iraq. You know, look at this terrible guy. I mean, this goes on without change. It's just almost fixed. I can understand it in 1939, but basically that's what we've been seeing since. There are blips like when the Soviet Union collapsed, there's slight changes in strategy, but fundamentally nothing different.

Well on the other hand, that's one side. On the other hand, you have had powerful movements of protest. The anti-war movement in Indochina took many, many years to develop, waited far too long. But it finally did grow to the point where it limited and probably terminated Nixon's efforts to escalate the war.

**TP:** Now the time that we have left is very limited from what you had said earlier. We have little time and ....

**NC:** ... now we have almost no time. And the problems are - I mean, the destruction of Indochina was bad enough, but now we're talking about the survival of human society. That's in our hands right now and it's utterly scandalous that the lead in struggling against this is teenage kids. Where's the rest of us? Greta Thunberg? OK, marvelous person. But why a 16-year old kid? (Yeah, indeed.) And

you know when she testifies at the UN everyone nods their heads and pats her on her head; very nice. Then it goes back to exactly where you were.

**TP:** So, again, the question, how optimistic are you that humanity can actually overcome these problems or will overcome these problems?

**NC:** You know, it's really not the right question. I mean, you have two choices. You can decide it's all hopeless, give up and make sure that the worst will happen. Or you can try to grasp what opportunities there are, and they do exist, and dedicate yourself to that. Maybe you'll make a better world. That's what the choice has always been – doesn't matter the way things go, it doesn't mean anything anyway.

**TP:** Good, so then I come to the next one. Learning from the last 50 years of progressive politics, what advice would you give to the next generation? How can they be more successful than your generation has been? Should they aim to build a more focused movement that attacks the great political evils in a certain plausible order? If so, what is the essential problem on which progressive political energies should now be focused?

**NC:** Oh, I think there are dangers. There's always the tendency towards adventurism and not thinking through the consequences of what you're doing, but doing it because you think the problems are so terrible we just have to act out. So, for example, take say the Weathermen in the latter part of the Vietnam War. Young kids, nice kids, I knew a lot of them. They were horrified about the war, feeling this is so awful, we've just got to march down Main Street and break windows and attack banks and so on. The Vietnamese were horrified. I remember meetings with Vietnamese saying you've got to talk them out of doing this. What they wanted was mild protests, so mild that the peace movement laughed at them because the Vietnamese didn't care how Americans felt. They wanted to survive. And they understood that if you carry out Weathermen-style activities, you're just increasing support for the war. So maybe you'll feel good, but we won't. We'll be killed. That happens all the time. And it's very easy, particularly among young people, they get really upset and want to do something wild. You have to think carefully through the consequences of the tactics you adopt. Choosing tactics is not a trivial matter. That's what human consequences depend on: your choice of tactics. And you can find case after case right now where it's not considered thoughtfully and properly.

Second thing to watch out for is infiltration. So, in the antiwar movement in the 60s, we learned very quickly that almost every group was infiltrated by government agents. And they weren't very hard to pick out. So, if somebody was dressed in the Hollywood version of what a hippie looks like, saying, "let's off the cops," you could be pretty sure that he'd show up at a trial testifying for the government pretty soon. But nevertheless, you had to be careful about it. And in fact, when we were doing anything sensitive, with human lives at stake, like helping deserters out of the country or something, we always did it in affinity groups, groups of people who just knew each other, because there was no way of being sure who the infiltrators are. They're gonna be there. I'm sure they're there now. When protests are getting violent, I immediately get suspicious. This has always

in the past been an effort by official sources to try to raise the level of violence, discredit the popular movements, and build up opposition to them. And they shift debate and discussion to the arena of violence, which is where the powerful win. So those are things to watch out for.

Another thing is what's called identity politics. It makes perfect sense, there are serious issues. But they have to be integrated with others. People who were dedicated to one particular concern, say police brutality against black kids, have to be able to work with others who have other concerns – what's sometimes called intersectionality – and work for common causes, maybe compromising your own in the interests of others when it's necessary to do so. But these are all kind of pitfalls, the kinds of pitfalls that occur in all sorts of activism. But they can be overcome.

Another pitfall is what the government and the establishment altogether is always trying to get you to do – reduce your political activism to pushing a button every four years and then go home. Take a look at the media coverage, the liberal media coverage of Bernie Sanders. It's pretty striking. They hate him. So, for example, *The New York Times* recently, a couple days ago, had an article on the Democratic establishment and how they're not sure that their candidates are really the right ones. Maybe they should bring in Hillary Clinton or somebody else. And they go through the top Democratic candidates, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, Pete Buttigieg. Somebody missing? Yeah? He is anathema and it's not because of his policies. It's because he made a real error. He organized a popular movement, a popular movement that doesn't just focus on every four years, but is acting constantly, like the ones who broke into the congressional offices and managed to get the Green New Deal on the agenda. That's not what people are for.

This goes way back in history, the framing of the Constitution, the British Civil War, the British Glorious Revolution in the 17th century. The rabble, as they're called, have their place. They are spectators, not participants. That's in fact, liberal democratic theory. Walter Lippmann, founders of modern political science and so on. "You know your place. It's not your business to run things – that's for us." And breaking that is a very important thing. If popular movements are going to be effective they're going to be constant. There's nothing wrong with participating in electoral politics, but that's a pretty marginal part of it. It's the other things you do that matter. And that's another pitfall to worry about.

On the other hand, the advice is just obvious. There are existential issues that just have to be in the forefront. If they're not settled, nothing else is going to matter. So, unless we end the threat of nuclear war and mitigate it, hopefully end the threat of environmental catastrophe, it's not going to matter what else happens, couple of decades it will all be over. So those have to be front and center, and then everything else.

As the people who set the doomsday clock pointed out, the deterioration of democratic structures and the collapse of information systems is a major problem. That's a powerful totalitarian device which is going to block effective action to deal with the major issues. So that has to be overcome. The problem of the massive inequality in Europe, where it's really extreme, where the policy choices have almost been taken out of the hands of populations. It's all in the hands of an unelected bureaucracy in Brussels. That's part of the European Union structure at this point. No wonder people are angry and upset. Everything is taken out of their hands anyway, along with the highly

destructive austerity programs, which have no serious economic basis and are just devastating societies, still rich societies, there's still lots of protection from their traditional social structure, but it's battering away at them. In the United States, it's worse because the structure is much weaker.

But all these things have to be addressed at the same time as problems of sexism, misogyny, anti-immigrant hysteria, children in concentration camps along the border not very far from us. All these things have to be dealt with, but they all integrate, they all interact with one another. Where you put your energy depends on your personal tastes, concerns, what strikes you, what you think you're good at. It has to be done with an eye to the validity of parallel concerns on the side, which we hope to interact with. It's not an easy task and it's again, scandalous, that this burden is placed on teenage kids.

**TP:** So impact is, obviously, one very important consideration. Impact: where can I have the most impact on history. But there are other considerations as well. The ends don't always justify the means, you might say. And you have spent a considerable amount of time as a kind of witness to history, collecting information and evidence showing what actually happened, setting the record straight, even when the victims in the particular case you were focusing on could no longer really benefit from that. So how do you trade off these concerns? What do you think are the standards by which you have oriented your political life?

**NC:** I mean, there are some standards which are virtual truisms, like the major existential concerns always have to be in the forefront. But for a particular individual, what he or she does depends on individual characteristics. What issue strikes you as the kind of thing you can do something about? Maybe it's fixing the things in the local community where you live, OK? Then do that. There's no general principle. Can't be.

**TP:** I mean, for you personally how have you resolved these things?

**NC:** It's very hard to say. Like, say, why pick out East Timor? You know, why? Because I barely knew about it. There was nothing reported about it. But there were two or three young people, as usual – happened to be graduate students in an East Asia studies program, the best one at Cornell, students of George Cahill, great South-East Asian scholar, who learned about the East Timor situation, were appalled by it. Arnold Cohen was the main one, who should get ten Nobel Prizes if they meant anything, and began to try to organize support for it. He contacted me, talked about it at some meetings and he went on. He's almost unknown but he personally has most of the responsibility for the fact that it finally ended. He purposely kept quiet in the background. Once I got involved, once you put your toe in one of these things, you're caught, no matter what it is, they're so dramatic.

You know, you go, as I have done, to a poor village in southern Colombia, hours away from the Panamerican Highway. If I get there over a dirt road pass a small cemetery with some wooden crosses where people in the village were wiped out by US-backed paramilitaries. Get into the village, talk to the people. People who are trying to protect the mountain near their village from being taken over by Canadian mining corporations which will wipe out their agriculture, their water

supply and so on. Just spend a couple hours like that, and you're just immersed in that problem. And the same is true of almost everything. Go downtown and spend some time with homeless people. Anywhere you look, there's problems so gripping and dramatic that you just can't help being involved. And it's just a choice. You can't do everything so you try to pick things that somehow matter to you.

**TP:** One thing that you already mentioned is this inexorable rise in inequality. Wealth inequality you mentioned. You also mentioned how that corrodes democracy and any kind of political equality. How could that possibly be rolled back? How can we get to a world which ...?

**NC:** Many ways. They're not very mysterious. So, for example, a wealth tax, not in the way it was done in Europe, which didn't work, there were too many evasions. But it can be done without all of the evasive structure that Europe had built in. That I think can work. Actually, Zucman and Saez, whom we talked about, had very concrete plans for that – that would make a difference.

**TP:** Could it be passed politically? Could it get through Congress?

**NC:** That depends on the strengths of popular movements. Anything can be passed if you have enough popular support for it. If you're banging on the doors of the Members of Congress, no matter how much they're being paid off, they have to be elected. So that can be passed, yes. It won't be easy.

A financial transaction tax would make a lot of sense. It would bring in plenty of money. It would cut back the operations of the financial institutions, which are simply destructive and predatory. Like whether you can make a trade a microsecond before the guy across the street. All of that; plenty of things.

Tax is something where public opinion has been very strong for years. For about 40 years, I guess, polls have been taken in the United States on taxes. Basically, two questions asked: Do you think your taxes are too high? Everybody says yes. Do you think taxes on the rich are too low? Everybody says yes. Take a look, there's a couple of papers on this in the political science literature. You take a look at the media reports. They only report the first: taxes are too [high].

Actually, that's a very interesting result. That's kind of a measure of whether democracies function. If you had a functioning democracy, people would celebrate the day when they paid their taxes. “Great. This is the day when we've made decisions about what has to be done in the society and how much everyone should contribute. Now these decisions are being implemented. Let's cheer.” The more taxes are opposed and feared, the more, you know, democracy is not functioning. The slogan: There are two things you can't get away from, that's death and taxes. That's telling you we don't live in a democracy. It's a very simple measure, and the fact that people think their taxes are too high, is telling you we don't believe in anything that's being done. Those guys up there are making decisions we don't have anything to do with. They're stealing from us, OK? We have to move towards a society where you celebrate your joint decisions about how to keep your societies running effectively. I want my schools running right. I'd like to have a park. I want to be able to drive on the roads. So, great. We're very far from that.

**TP:** And given globalization, of course, the problem of inequality is even greater because rich people can play off different countries against each other and can basically take their money out, get a different citizenship.

**NC:** That was the problem with the European wealth tax. It was set up in such a way that somebody in France could pretend to be in Luxembourg. But that's not necessary. You can have constraints against them. So, for example, in the US system – theoretically, it's not implemented – a U.S. citizen is taxed no matter where he is. Now somebody could say, okay, I can give up my citizenship but not many people want to do that to save a little money.

The tax havens are instituted by policy. That's not a law of nature. They take trillions of dollars. By some estimates, maybe 20 trillion dollars. Like Apple Computer, the biggest corporation, its corporate headquarters is in Ireland where they probably have an office about this size and a secretary. It's not graven in stone. All of these things can be dealt with. But, certainly, there's going to be barriers just like we were talking about before, the exorbitant protectionist principles that are written into the World Trade Organization, radically anti-free trade agreements, intellectual property rights, patent rights way beyond anything in the past. If they had been a part of the international system 200 years ago, the United States would be exporting fish and fur – it would be impossible to develop. They shouldn't exist.

There's a lot of bipartisan protest here in the United States against China, because it's not observing intellectual property rights. The population should be cheering! Who gains from the fact that there's exorbitant patents on pharmaceuticals? Not the people, who suffer from them. The pharmaceutical corporations make even more astronomical profits than they would if you had a reasonable regime. All of these things are under control. These people understand them.

In fact, the attack on China is extremely interesting. The main theme is China's taking away our jobs. Think about it for a second. Is the Chinese government holding a pistol to the head of the Apple corporation saying you've got to invest, or Boeing or IBM? No. The guys who are taking away our jobs are the bankers and investment managers in New York and Chicago who run the corporations. So let's go after them, not after China. A lot of these things are elementary. As soon as you point them out, everybody understands. So what you have to do is just take away this thin cover of deceptive propaganda. Let people look at the world and I think they can understand very well that there are many things they can do. [01:03:38]

**TP:** Good. I think we have to come to a close. But I want to thank you very, very much for giving us the time and giving us your responses to these questions. And with luck, we can have a little bit of a discussion on the day of the event. We'll see.

**NC:** Unfortunately, I have to go off to the next meeting.

**TP:** Yeah. That's OK. Thank you.

**NC:** Great to see you.

**END**