Can Civilization Survive "Really Existing Capitalism"? An Interview With Noam Chomsky

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By C.J. Polychroniou, Truthout | Interview

Noam Chomsky (Photo: Haymarket Books)

More than four decades of Noam Chomsky's writings are available in a new anthology from Haymarket Books. Get this collection from the master of opposing the hubris of US empire. Click here now.

For decades now, Noam Chomsky has been widely regarded as the most important intellectual alive (linguist, philosopher, social and political critic) and the leading US dissident since the Vietnam War. Chomsky has published over 100 books and thousands of articles and essays, and is the recipient of dozens of honorary doctorate degrees by some of the world's greatest academic institutions. His latest book, Masters of Mankind: Essays and Lectures, 1969-2013, has just been published by Haymarket Books. On the occasion of the release of his last book, Chomsky gave an exclusive and wide-ranging interview to C.J. Polychroniou for Truthout, parts of which will also appear in The Sunday Eleftherotypia, a major national Greek newspaper.

C.J. Polychroniou: In a nationally televised address on the eve of the 13th anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the United States, Obama announced to the American people and the rest of the world that the United States is going back to war in Iraq, this time against the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Is Iraq an unfinished business of the US invasion of 2003, or is the situation there merely the inevitable outcome of the strategic agenda of the Empire of Chaos?

Noam Chomsky: "Inevitable" is a strong word, but the appearance of ISIS and the general spread of radical jihadism is a fairly natural outgrowth of Washington wielding its sledgehammer at the fragile society of Iraq, which was barely hanging together after a decade of US-UK sanctions so onerous that the respected international diplomats who administered them via the UN both resigned in protest, charging that they were "genocidal."

"It's worth noting that religious fanaticism is spreading in the West as well, as democracy erodes."

One of the most respected mainstream US Middle East analysts, former CIA operative Graham Fuller, recently wrote that "I think the United States is one of the key creators of [ISIS]. The United States did not plan the formation of ISIS, but its destructive interventions in the Middle East and the war in Iraq were the basic causes of the birth of ISIS."

He is correct, I think. The situation is a disaster for the US, but is a natural result
of its invasion. One of the grim consequences of US-UK aggression was to inflame sectarian conflicts that are now tearing Iraq to shreds, and have spread over the whole region, with awful consequences.

ISIS seems to represent a new jihadist movement, with greater inherent tendencies toward barbarity in the pursuit of its mission to re-establish an Islamic caliphate, yet apparently more able to recruit young radical Muslims from the heart of Europe, and even as far as Australia, than al-Qaeda itself. In your view, why has religious fanaticism become the driving force behind so many Muslim movements around the world?

Like Britain before it, the US has tended to support radical Islam and to oppose secular nationalism, which both imperial states have regarded as more threatening to their goals of domination and control. When secular options are crushed, religious extremism often fills the vacuum. Furthermore, the primary US ally over the years, Saudi Arabia, is the most radical Islamist state in the world and also a missionary state, which uses its vast oil resources to promulgate its extremist Wahabi/Salafi doctrines by establishing schools, mosques, and in other ways, and has also been the primary source for the funding of radical Islamist groups, along with Gulf Emirates - all US allies.

It's worth noting that religious fanaticism is spreading in the West as well, as democracy erodes. The US is a striking example. There are not many countries in the world where the large majority of the population believes that God's hand guides evolution, and almost half of these think that the world was created a few thousand years ago. And as the Republican Party has become so extreme in serving wealth and corporate power that it cannot appeal to the public on its actual policies, it has been compelled to rely on these sectors as a voting base, giving them substantial influence on policy.

The US committed major war crimes in Iraq, but the acts of violence committed these day against civilians in the country, particularly against children and people from various ethnic and religious communities, is also simply appalling. Given that Iraq exhibited its longest stretch of political stability under Saddam Hussein, what didactic lessons should one draw from today's extremely messy situation in that part of the world?

The most elementary lesson is that it is wise to adhere to civilized norms and international law. The criminal violence of rogue states like the US and UK is not guaranteed to have catastrophic consequences, but we can hardly claim to be surprised when it does.

US attacks against ISIS's bases in Syria without the approval and collaboration of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad would constitute a violation of international law, claimed Damascus, Moscow and Tehran before the start of bombing. However, isn't it the case that the destruction of ISIS's forces in Syria would further strengthen the Syrian regime? Or is it that the Assad regime is afraid it will be next in line?

The Assad regime has been rather quiet. It has not, for example, appealed to the Security Council to act to terminate the attack, which is, undoubtedly, in violation of the UN Charter, the foundation of modern international law (and if anyone cares, part of the "Supreme law of the land" in the US, under the Constitution). Assad’s murderous regime doubtless can see what the rest of the world does: the US attack on ISIS weakens its main enemy.

In addition to some Western nations, Arab states have also offered military support to US attacks against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Is this a case of one form of Islamic fundamentalism (Saudi Arabia, for example) exhibiting fear for another form of Islamic fundamentalism (ISIS)?

As the New York Times accurately reported, the support is "tepid." The regimes surely fear ISIS, but it apparently continue to draw financial support from wealthy donors in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and its ideological roots, as I mentioned, are in Saudi radical Islamic extremism, which has not abated.

Life in Gaza has returned to normalcy after Hamas and Israel agreed to a cease-fire. For how long?

I would hesitate to use the term "normalcy." The latest onslaught was even more vicious than its predecessors, and its impact is horrendous. The Egyptian military dictatorship, which is bitterly anti-Hamas, is also adding to the tragedy.
What will happen next? There has been a regular pattern since the first such agreement was reached between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in November 2005. It called for "a crossing between Gaza and Egypt at Rafah for the export of goods and the transit of people, continuous operation of crossings between Israel and Gaza for the import/export of goods, and the transit of people, reduction of obstacles to movement within the West Bank, bus and truck convoys between the West Bank and Gaza, the building of a seaport in Gaza, [and the] re-opening of the airport in Gaza" that Israeli bombing had demolished.

Later agreements have been variants on the same themes, the current one as well. Each time, Israel has disregarded the agreements while Hamas has lived up to them (as Israel concedes) until some Israeli escalation elicits a Hamas response, which gives Israel another opportunity to "mow the lawn," in its elegant phrase. The interim periods of "quiet" (meaning one-way quiet) allow Israel to carry forward its policies of taking over whatever it values in the West Bank, leaving Palestinians in dismembered cantons. All, of course, with crucial US support: military, economic, diplomatic and ideological, in framing the issues in accord with Israel's basic perspective.

That, indeed, was the purpose of Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005 - while remaining the occupying power, as recognized by the world (apart from Israel), even the US. The purpose was outlined candidly by the architect and chief negotiator of the "disengagement," Prime Minister Sharon's close associate, Dov Weissglass. He informed the press that "The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process. And when you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda. And all this with authority and permission. All with a [US] presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress."

That pattern has been reiterated over and over, and it seems that it is being re-enacted today. However, some knowledgeable Israeli commentators have suggested that Israel might finally relax its torture of Gaza. Its illegal takeover of much of the West Bank (including Greater Jerusalem) has proceeded so far that Israeli authorities might anticipate that it is irreversible. And they now have a cooperative ally in the brutal military dictatorship in Egypt. Furthermore, the rise of ISIS and the general shattering of the region have improved the tacit alliance with the Saudi dictatorship and possibly others. Conceivably, Israel might depart from its extreme rejectionism, though for now, the signs do not look auspicious.

The latest Israeli carnage in Gaza stirred public sentiment around the world increasingly against the state of Israel. To what extent is the unconditional support rendered by the US toward Israel the outplay of domestic political factors, and under what conditions do you see a shift in Washington’s policy toward Tel Aviv?

There are very powerful domestic factors. One illustration was given right in the midst of the latest Israeli assault. At one point, Israeli weapons seemed to be running low, and the US kindly supplied Israel with more advanced weapons, which enabled it to carry the onslaught further. These weapons were taken from the stocks that the US pre-positions in Israel, for eventual use by US forces, one of many indications of the very close military connections that go back many years. Intelligence interactions are even better established. Israel is also a favored location for US investors, not just in its advanced military economy. There is a huge voting bloc of evangelical Christians that is fanatically pro-Israel. There is also an effective Israel lobby, which is often pushing an open door - and which quickly backs down when it confronts US power not surprisingly.

There are, however, shifts in popular sentiments, particularly among younger people, including the Jewish community. I experience that personally, as do others. Not long ago I literally had to have police protection when I spoke on these topics on college campuses, even my own university. That has greatly changed. By now Palestine solidarity is a major commitment on many campuses. Over time, these changes could combine with some other factors to lead to a change of US policy. It's happened before. But it will take hard, serious, dedicated work.

What are the aims and the objectives of US policy in Ukraine, other than stirring up trouble and then letting other forces do the dirty work?
Immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, the US began seeking to extend its dominance, including NATO membership, over the regions released from Russian control - in violation of verbal promises to Gorbachev, whose protests were dismissed. Ukraine is surely the next ripe fruit that the US hopes to pluck from the tree.

Doesn't Russia have a legitimate concern over Ukraine's potential alliance with NATO?

"The US is at the root of the current Ukraine crisis."

Looking at the current situation in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Nigeria, Ukraine, the China Sea and even in parts of Europe, Zbigniew Brzezinski's recent comment on MSNBC that "We are facing a kind of dynamically spreading chaos in parts of the world" seems rather apropos. How much of this development is related to the decline of a global hegemon and to the balance of power that existed in the era of the Cold War?

US power reached its peak in 1945 and has been rather steadily declining ever since. There have been many changes in recent years. One is the rise of China as a major power. Another is Latin America's breaking free of imperial control (for the last century, US control) for the first time in 500 years. Related to these developments is the rise of the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, China, South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, based in China and including India, Pakistan, the Central Asian states, and others.

But the US remains the dominant global power, by a large measure.

Last month marked the 69th anniversary of the US atomic bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, yet nuclear disarmament remains a chimera. In a recent article of yours, you underscored the point that we are merely lucky to have avoided a nuclear war so far. Do you think, then, that it's a matter of time before nuclear weapons fall into the hands of terrorist groups?

Nuclear weapons are already in the hands of terrorist groups: state terrorists, the US primary among them. It's conceivable that weapons of mass destruction might also fall into the hands of "retail terrorists," greatly enhancing the enormous dangers to survival.

Since the late 1970s, most advanced economies have returned to predatory capitalism. As a result, income and wealth inequality have reached spectacular heights, poverty is becoming entrenched, unemployment is skyrocketing and standards of living are declining. In addition, "really existing capitalism" is causing mass environmental damage and destruction which along with the population explosion, is leading us to an unmitigated global disaster. Can civilization survive really existing capitalism?

First, let me say that what I have in mind by the term "really existing capitalism" is what really exists and what is called "capitalism." The United States is the most important case, for obvious reasons. The term "capitalism" is vague enough to cover many possibilities. It is commonly used to refer to the US economic system, which receives substantial state intervention, ranging from creative innovation to the "too-big-to-fail" government insurance policy for banks, and which is highly monopolized, further limiting market reliance.

"Really existing capitalism - RECD for short (pronounced 'wrecked') - is radically incompatible with
consumers making rational choices. Computers and the internet, along with other basic components of the IT revolution, were largely in the state sector (R&D, subsidy, procurement, and other devices) for decades before they were handed over to private enterprise for adaptation to commercial markets and profit. The government insurance policy, which provides big banks with enormous advantages, has been roughly estimated by economists and the business press to be perhaps on the order of as much as $80 billion a year. However, a recent study by the International Monetary Fund indicates - to quote the business press - that perhaps "the largest US banks aren't really profitable at all," adding that "the billions of dollars they allegedly earn for their shareholder were almost entirely a gift from US taxpayers." This is more evidence to support the judgment of Martin Wolf of the London Financial Times, that "an out-of-control financial sector is eating out the modern market economy from inside, just as the larva of the spider wasp eats out the host in which it has been laid."

In a way, all of this explains the economic devastation produced by contemporary capitalism that you underscore in your question above. Really existing capitalism - RECD for short (pronounced "wrecked") - is radically incompatible with democracy. 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. Really existing capitalism is a human creation, and can be changed or replaced.

Your latest book, Masters of Mankind, which came out in September by Haymarket Books, is a collection of essays written between 1969 and 2013. The world has changed a great deal during this period, so my question is this: Has your understanding of the world changed over time, and, if so, what have been the most catalytic events in altering your perspective about politics?

My understanding of the world has changed over time as I've learned a lot more about the past and ongoing events regularly add new critical materials. I can't really identify single events or people. It's cumulative, a constant process of re-thinking in the light of new information and more consideration of what I hadn't properly understood. However, hierarchical and arbitrary power remains at the core of politics in our world and the source of all evils.

In a recent exchange we had, I expressed my pessimism about the future of our species. You replied by saying "I share your conviction, but keep remembering the line I've occasionally quoted from the Analects, defining the 'exemplary person' - presumably the master himself: 'the one who keeps trying, though he knows there is no hope.'” Is the situation as dire as that?

We cannot know for sure. What we do know, however, is that if we succumb to despair we will help ensure that the worst will happen. And if we grasp the hopes that exist and work to make the best use of them, there might be a better world.

Not much of a choice.

"Hierarchical and arbitrary power remains at the core of politics in our world and the source of all evils."

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