

Noam Chomsky: In Response to Coronavirus, "You Can Do Something"

AN INTERVIEW WITH
NOAM CHOMSKY

In a new interview, Noam Chomsky gives his thoughts on the coronavirus pandemic, the depravities of capitalism, and the urgent need for a new era of solidarity and labor struggle.

INTERVIEW BY

Chris Brooks

For decades Noam Chomsky has been a leading intellectual troublemaker. His books and speeches have helped to explain how a world run by corporations and billionaires has led to endless war and catastrophic climate change. Now he is helping to explain how corporations and billionaires are actually making the coronavirus pandemic worse by pursuing savage policies that benefit themselves at the expense of everyone else.

Chris Brooks interviewed Professor Chomsky on April 10 to learn more about how we got into this moment — and what it will take to get us out of it.

I wanted to start out with getting your thoughts generally on the unprecedented moment we're in. We're obviously in the midst of both a global pandemic and a global recession and right now millions of people in the United States have found themselves both unemployed and uninsured while our health care system is overloaded and lacking anything close to the number of hospital beds and ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) that we need. We could spend the whole half-hour on this question alone, but in brief strokes, could you outline for us how to understand the current moment we're in and the political choices that led us here?

CB

NC | Well, first of all, we should recognize that unless we get to the roots of this pandemic, it's going to recur, probably in worse form, simply because of the manipulations of the capitalist system which are trying to create circumstances in which it will be worse, for their benefit. We can see that in the stimulus bill, among many other things.

Now, second, because of the global warming which is going on and puts all of this into the shadow, we will recover from this at severe cost. We're not going to recover from the ongoing melting of the polar ice sheets. And if you want to understand how contemporary capital is looking at this, take a look at Trump's budget. It's true that this is a pathological extreme of the normal capitalist systems and maybe it's not fair to use it as an example, but that's what we're living with.

So, on February 10 while the epidemic was raging, and going to get worse, Trump came out with his budget proposals. What were they? First point: continue the defunding of health-related elements of the government.

Throughout his term he'd been cutting back on funding of anything that doesn't benefit private power and wealth, corporate power. So all the health-related parts of the government had been increasingly defunded. He killed programs, all sorts of things.

February 10, let's continue with it. So further defunding of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other health-related parts of the government. But there were also compensating increases in the budget, more subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. So, let's not only to kill as many people as possible now, but let's try to destroy all of society. That's basically what the words mean. Of course, there was more funding for the military and for his famous wall.

But these two things stand out very brightly as an indication of the criminality that is first of all endemic but is highlighted in the sociopathic White House; brings it out radically. But, of course, Trump can't be blamed for all of this. It goes back, and we better think about it.

After the SARS epidemic in 2003 — also a coronavirus — it was well understood by scientists that other recurrences of one or another coronavirus was going to come, probably more serious. Well, understanding is not enough. Someone has to pick up the ball and run with it. Now there are two possibilities. One is the drug companies, but they follow normal, capitalist logic. You do what makes profit tomorrow. You don't worry about the fact that in a couple of years everything's going to collapse. That's not your problem. So, the drug companies essentially did nothing. There were things that could be done. There was plenty of information circulating. Scientists knew what to do. There could have been preparations. Somebody's got to pay for it. Not the drug companies. Well, in a rational world, even a capitalist world prior to Ronald Reagan, the government could have stepped in and done it.

That's pretty much the way polio was eradicated, through a government-initiated and -funded program. When Jonas Salk discovered the vaccine, he insisted that there be no patents. He said, "It's got to be public, just like the sun." That's still capitalism, but it's regimented capitalism. That was ended at a stroke by Ronald Reagan. Government's the problem, it's not the solution. Let's legalize tax havens. Let's legalize stock buybacks costing tens of trillions of dollars to the public in pure robbery.

Government is the solution when the private sector's in trouble, that's understood. But if it's just when the public needs something, government's not the answer. So, going back to 2003, government couldn't step in. Actually, it did to a slight extent step in, and it's very revealing to see what happened. Obama, after the Ebola crisis, recognized that there are problems. We have to do something.

Obama did several things. One of them was to try to contract for ventilators. Ventilators are the big bottleneck in the system right now. That's what's forcing nurses to decide who to kill tomorrow. There aren't enough of them, but the Obama administration did contract for the development of high-quality, low-cost ventilators. The company was quickly bought up by a bigger one which sidelined the project — it was competing with their own expensive ventilators — and then turned to the government and said they want to get out of the contract, it's not profitable enough.

That's savage capitalism. Not just capitalism, but neoliberal capitalism. It gets worse. In January and February of this year, when US intelligence services were pounding at the door of the White House saying, "Hey, there's a real crisis. Do something." Couldn't do it. But the Trump administration was doing something, namely it was exporting ventilators to China and other countries to improve the trade balance. That went on into March.

Now the same manufacturers and shipping companies that were sending them out are bringing them back, double profit. This is what we're living with. It can easily go on. So, if you look back over the whole thing, at the base is a colossal market failure. The markets simply don't work. It can work for selling shoes sometimes, but if anything significant happens, it's none of their business. You have to operate as Milton Friedman and others pointed out: just by greed. You do things for your own welfare, wealth, nothing else. It's a built-in disaster. We've had so many examples; I don't have to review it. So, at the beginning is a market failure. Then comes the extra hammer blow of savage capitalism, neoliberalism, which we've been suffering from over the world for forty years, goes beyond ventilators.

Hospitals in the United States have to be run on a business model. So, no spare capacity. It doesn't work even in normal times. And plenty of people, including me, can testify on that in the best hospitals. But it kind of works. However, if anything goes wrong, you're sunk. Tough luck. Maybe that's okay for automobile manufacturing. It doesn't work for health care. Our health care system altogether is an international scandal. But the business model, of course, just makes it a built-in disaster.

And some of the other things that went on are just too surreal to discuss. USAID had a very successful program detecting viruses that are in animal populations, wild populations that are getting to closer contact with humans because of habitat destruction and global warming. They were identifying thousands of potential disease viruses, working in China as well. Trump disbanded it. He'd been defunding it, but then he disbanded it with exquisite timing in October.

I could go on and on. This is the picture you get. A bunch of sadistic sociopaths in the White House intensifying deep market failures that go much farther back. And now intensifying it further. The rich are not waiting to see how to build the

next world. They're working on it right now, making sure it comes out the right way. Further subsidies to fossil fuels, destroy EPA regulations that might save people but harm profits, this is all going on right in front of our eyes and the question is, will there be counterforces? If not ...

Before we move on to the discussion maybe of popular movements and how to fight back in this, in the discussion of market failures, they seem to be combining as well with the legacy of institutional racism in the United States and we see this playing out in the disproportionate impact that the coronavirus is having in black communities. In your view, how should we understand this?

CB

NC | We can understand that by going back four centuries to when the first slaves were brought. I don't want to have to run through the whole history, but the most vicious system of slavery in human history is the basis, large part of the basis for US prosperity.

Cotton was the oil of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. You had to have cheap cotton. You don't get that by following the rules they teach you in the economics department. You get it by vicious, brutal slavery. That's laid the basis for manufacturing, textile manufacturing, finance, commerce, retail, obviously, that went on through much of the nineteenth century. Well, finally, slavery was formally ended for about ten years during the Reconstruction period. Then there was an agreement with the South that they could go on exactly the way they were before. So, you get one of the best books on the topic called *Slavery by Another Name*, measures taken to essentially criminalize the black population. So the

black guy standing on a street corner, they fine him for vagrancy. He can't pay the fine. Okay, you go to a chain gang.

The end result was this great manufacturing revolution of the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, largely built on, it wasn't called slavery, but ownership of the black population by the state. It's much better than slavery. If you have slaves, you have to keep them alive. Well, if you put them in prison, the government has to keep them alive. You just get them when you need them and there's no question of a lack of discipline or protest or anything like that. This went on almost until the Second World War. At that point there were jobs. People had to work.

But then comes new forms of imposed slavery. So well into the late 1960s, federal housing laws required segregation. There was a lot of public-supported housing going on in the 1950s: Levittowns and so on, but for whites, no blacks. Liberal senators voted for this, hated it, but they voted for it because there was no other way to get any public housing passed.

The United States had anti-miscegenation laws — so severe that the Nazis refused to accept them — into the 1960s. Then it takes other forms. The Supreme Court just essentially did what the government did back at the end of Reconstruction, told the Southern states, you can do whatever you like. They eliminated the Voting Rights Act. We've just seen this a few days ago in Wisconsin. Incredible. If you want to see democracy simply crushed, take a look what happened days ago in Wisconsin.

The Democratic governor sensibly wanted to delay the primary and extend absentee voting. I mean, nothing could make more perfect sense. There is a Republican-dominated legislature that had a small minority of votes, but gerrymandering gave them the largest number of seats in the Republican

legislature. They called a session. I don't think the Republicans even bothered to show up. The Majority Leader simply called the session and closed it. Didn't consider the governor's proposal, supported by the Supreme Court.

This is designed to ensure that poor minority voters, people who can't get the polls easily — mostly Democrats — won't vote. The rich, the traditional base of the ones who did all this, they vote. It's an open way, not even concealed, to try to ensure that no matter what the public wants, the most reactionary policies will be maintained permanently.

[Senate Majority Leader] Mitch McConnell is the evil genius behind this. He's been doing it beautifully. Make sure that the judiciary is stuffed with young, mostly unqualified, ultra-reactionary justices. That ensures that whatever the country wants in the future, they'll be able to kill it. Just like the Roberts Court, the majority is able to do it now. Republicans know that they're a minority party. There's no way to get votes on their actual programs. That's why they have to appeal to so-called cultural issues — gun rights, abortion, and so on — not their actual policies, which are fill the pockets of the rich. That's the actual policy. Trump is a genius at this; you have to admire him. With one hand he says, "I'm your savior, I'm working for the poor working guy." On the other hand, he's stabbing him in the back. It's pretty impressive. He's most certainly the most successful con man in American history, ever.

I presume it'll explode sometime, but so far, it's maintaining itself. They're trying very hard to dismantle whatever elements of democracy there are. There are models elsewhere, [Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán in Hungary is doing the same thing. In fact, it's kind of interesting, it's pretty hard to identify a coherent geopolitical strategy from the chaos in the White House. But there is one that comes out with considerable clarity: form an international of the most reactionary states in the world, then let that be the basis for US power.

So [President Abdel Fattah el-]Sisi in Egypt, the worst tyrant in Egypt's history, the family dictators in Saudi Arabia, in particular MBS [Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud], the biggest killer. Israel, which is going way to the right, is now at the center of it. Former tacit relations between Israel and the Arab states are now becoming open. [Prime Minister Narendra] Modi in India, what he's doing is simply unspeakable. He gave four hours' notice for the total lockdown. Most of the population in India is informal workers. They don't have anywhere to go. They can't stay home. There's no home. So, they're trekking on the highways, maybe a thousand miles to some village somewhere, dying on the way. It's impossible to imagine what this is going to do. But since they're mostly poor and many of them are Muslim, who cares? So he's a major part of this reactionary international. Nice guys like Orbán in Hungary and the like. They love them.

[Former Deputy Prime Minister Matteo] Salvini in Italy, one of the worst gangsters around. In the Western hemisphere the main representative is [President Jair] Bolsonaro in Brazil, who's vying with Trump to see who can be the worst criminal in the world. Trump easily can beat him because of US power, but the policies are not much different and that's harming not just Brazil but the whole world. Current predictions in scientific journals are that in about fifteen years the Amazon will shift from being a net carbon sink to a net carbon CO₂ emitter. That's a disaster, and all the result of extended gifts by Bolsonaro to the mining industries and agribusinesses. So there are guys trying to create the next world. They're working hard. They always do. Their relentless, constant class war never stops and if they're allowed to win, we're toast.

And along those lines, you've said it's really valuable to read the business press because they're often very frank about what they think of the world and what they're doing, what their plans and schemes are. From our viewpoint, we're seeing a lot of rank-and-file activity in the United States right now. Strikes are taking place in many locations. Workers are organizing in response to the coronavirus and being encouraged to work in unsafe conditions. Are the employers talking about that and are they worried about it? CB

NC | Oh, boy, are they. In fact, as you know, every January, the guys who modestly call themselves the "masters of the universe" gather in Davos, Switzerland, to go skiing, talk about how wonderful they are, and so on and so forth. This January meeting was very interesting. They see that the peasants are coming with the pitchforks and they're worried about it. So, there's a shift. You look at the theme of the meeting, it's, "Yeah, we did bad things in the past. We now understand it. We're now opening a new era in capitalism, a new era in which we aren't just concerned with the stockholders, but with the workers and the population and we're such good guys, so humanist that you can entrust your faith to us. We'll make sure everything's fine."

And it was pretty interesting to see what happened. There were two main speakers. This should be played in every classroom in the country. Trump, of course, gave the keynote speech. Greta Thunberg gave the other speech. The contrast was fantastic. The first speech is this raving buffoon, screaming about how greedy he is, and we can't even count up the number of the lies. The second speech is a seventeen-year-old girl quietly giving a factual, accurate description of what's happening in the world and looking these guys in the face and saying,

"You're destroying our lives." And of course, everyone politely claps. Nice little girl. Go back to school.

The reaction to Trump was particularly interesting. They don't like him. His vulgarity and crudity are interfering with the image they're trying to project as dedicated humanists. But they love him. They gave him a round of upstanding applause and couldn't stop cheering. Because they understand something: this guy, no matter how vulgar he is, knows very well whose pockets to fill and how to fill them. So, he can be a buffoon. We'll tolerate his antics as long as he continues with the policies that count. That's the Davos men.

They didn't bother pointing out that we've heard this tune before. Back in the 1950s it was called the soulful corporation. Corporations have become soulful. Now they're just overflowing with kindness for working people and everyone else. It's a new era. Well, we've had some time to see how soulful they were, and this will continue.

So, either we can be taken in by the con and let it go, or you can fight back and create a different world. It's a very good opportunity for it now. The strikes that you mentioned, protests all over the world. There are community self-help groups forming in poor neighborhoods, or people helping each other trying to do something for the elderly who are cooped up. Some of them are astounding.

So, go to Brazil, where the president is just a monstrosity. For him, the whole pandemic is just a cold. The Brazilians are immune to viruses. "We're special people," and so on and so forth. The government's doing nothing. Some of the governors are, but not the federal government. The worst of this is going to be in the slums, the impoverished areas, the indigenous areas. In the worst slums like the *favelas* in Rio, washing your hands every couple of hours is a little difficult when you don't have water, or separating yourself when you're crammed into

one room. But there is a group that came and tried to impose some reasonable standards as well as possible under these horrible conditions. Who? The crime gangs that have been terrorizing the *favelas*. They're so powerful, the police are afraid to go in. They organized to try to deal with the health crisis.

It tells you something, just like the nurses on the front line. There are human resources there and they can come to the fore in some of the most unexpected places. Not from the corporate sector, not from the wealthy, not from the soulful corporations. Certainly not from governments, particularly pathological ones like this. Others are doing better. But from popular action, that's the hope.

Bernie Sanders, when he gave his withdrawal speech, emphasized this. He said the campaign may be ending, the movement isn't. It's up to especially his young supporters to put some meat onto that, that it can be done. No matter what happens. If Trump's reelected, it's an utter tragedy. If Biden's elected, it won't be wonderful. But either way you've got to do what's possible, and it's not out of reach.

Do you think most people are going to emerge from their homes after the quarantine is over with their political opinions changed or intact?

CB

NC | We'll see. It's certainly a time for reflection about the kind of things we were just talking about. Why are we in this situation? What we were just talking about is not profound. It's on the surface. It's not quantum physics. Think about it a little. It's obvious. So maybe people will do it

or maybe they'll stay mesmerized by the con man in office. I get letters from poor working people, who say, "You goddamn liberals are bringing all the immigrants to steal our jobs and Trump is saving us." Okay. Maybe it's possible to break through to them. It's not easy.

These guys are tuned to Fox News all day. That's the echo chamber. If you're looking at it from outer space and you're not suffering from it, you think, what's going on? This maniac in the White House comes out and says whatever he says, and the opposite the next day. It's all repeated with fervor in the Fox echo chamber. Meanwhile, he's looking at Fox News every morning to figure out what to say. It's his source of news and information. And then you get the intelligent guys like Mike Pompeo who says, "God sent Trump to earth to save Israel from Iran." That's the sensible guy. It's some ironic joke being played. Let's say there is a God, maybe. If so, he decided that he made a bad mistake on the sixth day and he's now going to end it with humor. Just watch these people destroy themselves. That's what it looks like.

Is there the chance that the United States could build up a culture of solidarity and a labor politics coming out of this like the United Kingdom did after World War II, that could lead to something like the National Health Service, recognizing all of these market failures, recognizing the inefficiencies and the complications that are created when you're competing rather than coordinating resources? Is it possible for the United States to move in this direction?

CB

NC | Sure. We've done it before. I lived through the Depression. That's why I have this long white beard. But in the 1920s the labor movement was totally crushed. Take a look at David Montgomery, a labor historian, one of his great books is *The Fall of the House of Labor*. He's talking about the 1920s. It was crushed by the liberal Wilson administration, the Red Scare and all the rest. In the 1930s it began to revive. The CIO organizing sit-down strikes, a great threat to management: next thing that's going to come to their heads is, "We don't need the bosses. We can run this place ourselves." And then you're done. It's a very fragile system.

Well, that led to reactions. There happened to be a sympathetic administration, which is critical. A very good labor historian, Erik Loomis, has studied case after case of this and he points out that moments of positive change have almost always been led by an active labor movement and the only times they succeeded were when there was a relatively sympathetic administration, or at least a tolerant one.

Well, you don't happen to have that now, but actually if Biden came in, it's not great, but he could be pushed. If the labor movement revives, the Sanders movement — which is very significant, he's achieved great successes — if that can take off, we once again could get out of the capitalist crises as was done in the 1930s.

The New Deal didn't end the Depression, the war did with massive state-directed production, but nevertheless it was much better than today. I'm old enough to remember it and my extended family were mostly first-generation working people, mostly unemployed, living under poverty that is much worse than the working class today. But it was hopeful. There weren't depths of despair. There wasn't a feeling that the world's coming to an end. The mood was, "Somehow we'll get out of this together, working together." Some of them were

in the Communist Party, some were in the labor unions. I had a couple of aunts who were unemployed seamstresses, but they were in ILGWU [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union], which gave them a cultural life, meetings, a week in the country, theater activities that were being carried out.

You can do something. We're together. We'll get out of it. That could be revived.

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Noam Chomsky is professor emeritus of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Haymarket Books recently released twelve of his classic books in new editions.

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