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We Can't Let COVID-19 Drive Us Into Authoritarianism



President Trump's hands are seen as he speaks to the press after a meeting with nursing industry representatives on the response to COVID-19, at the White House in Washington, D.C., March 18, 2020.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

BY

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Note: This excerpt was adapted from Internationalism or Extinction by Noam Chomsky, edited by Charles Derber, Suren Moodliar and Paul Shannon.

As the COVID-19 pandemic turns the global political and economic order on its head, two vastly different futures appear possible. At one end of the spectrum, societies facing the toll of the virus may collapse into authoritarianism. But at the other end of the spectrum, we have the possibility of learning the lessons of this disaster — another colossal market failure enhanced by a neoliberal assault and now Trump’s wrecking ball.

The current crisis offers a powerful argument for universal health care and rethinking deeper problems of our societies. Which outcome will prevail depends on the strength of aroused public opinion, as described in the examples that follow, which are adapted for *Truthout* from my book *Internationalism or Extinction*.

If you'll indulge me, I'd like to start with a brief reminiscence of a period which is eerily similar to today in many unpleasant respects. I'm thinking of 80 years ago. It happened to be the moment of the first article that I remember having written on political issues. Easy to date: it was right after the fall of Barcelona in February 1939.

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The article was about what seemed to be the inexorable spread of fascism over the world. In 1938, Austria had been annexed by Nazi Germany. A few months later, Czechoslovakia was betrayed, placed in the hands of the Nazis at the Munich Conference.

In Spain, one city after another was falling to Franco's forces. February 1939, Barcelona fell. That was the end of the Spanish Republic. The remarkable popular revolution, anarchist revolution, of 1936, '37, '38, had already been crushed by force. It looked as if fascism was going to spread without end.

It's not exactly what's happening today, but, if we can borrow Mark Twain's famous phrase, "History doesn't repeat but sometimes rhymes" – too many similarities to overlook. When Barcelona fell, there was a huge flood of refugees from Spain. Most went to Mexico, about 40,000. Some went to New York City, established anarchist offices in Union Square, secondhand bookstores down 4th Avenue. That's where I got my early political education, roaming around that area. That's 80 years ago. Now it's today.

We didn't know at the time, but the US government was also beginning to think about how the spread of fascism might be virtually unstoppable. They didn't view it with the same alarm that I did as a 10-year-old. We now know that the attitude of the State Department was rather mixed regarding what the significance of the Nazi movement was.

Actually, there was a consul in Berlin, US consul in Berlin, who was sending back pretty mixed comments about the Nazis, suggesting maybe they're not as bad as everyone says. He stayed there until Pearl Harbor Day, when he was withdrawn – the famous diplomat named George Kennan. Not a bad indication of the mixed attitude towards these developments. It turns out, couldn't have known it at the time, but shortly after this, 1939, the State Department and the Council on Foreign Relations began to carry out planning

about the postwar world, what the postwar world would look like. And in the early years, right about that time, next few years, they assumed that the postwar world would be divided between a German-controlled world, Nazi-controlled world, most of Eurasia, and a US-controlled world, which would include the Western Hemisphere, the former British Empire – which the US would take over parts of the Far East. And that would be the shape of the postwar world. Those views, we now know, were maintained until the Russians turned the tide. Stalingrad, 1942–1943, the huge tank battle at Kursk, a little later, made it pretty clear that the Russians would defeat the Nazis. The planning changed. Picture of the postwar world changed, went on to what we've seen for the last period since that time. Well, that was 80 years ago.

Today we are not facing the rise of anything like Nazism, but we are facing the spread of what's sometimes called the ultranationalist, reactionary international. The Middle East alliance consists of the extreme reactionary states of the region – Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt under the most brutal dictatorship of its history, Israel right at the center of it – confronting Iran. There are severe threats that we're facing in Latin America. The election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil put in power the most extreme, most outrageous of the right-wing

ultranationalists who are now plaguing the hemisphere Lenín Moreno of Ecuador took a strong step towards joining the far-right alliance by expelling Julian Assange from the embassy. He was picked up quickly by the UK, and will face a very dangerous future unless there's a significant popular protest. Mexico is one of the rare exceptions in Latin America to these developments. In Western Europe, the right-wing parties are growing, some of them very frightening in character.

There is also a counter-development. Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of Greece, a very significant, important individual, along with Bernie Sanders, has urged the formation of a Progressive International to counter the right-wing international that's developing. At the level of states, the balance looks overwhelmingly in the wrong direction. But states aren't the only entities. At the level of people, it's quite different. And that could make the difference. That means a need to protect the functioning democracies, to enhance them, to make use of the opportunities they provide, for the kinds of activism that have led to significant progress in the past and that could save us in the future.

I want to make a couple of remarks below about the severe difficulty of maintaining and instituting democracy, the powerful forces that have always

opposed it, the achievements of somehow salvaging and enhancing it, and the significance of that for the future. But first, a couple of words about the challenges that we face, which you heard enough about already and you all know about. I don't have to go into them in detail. To describe these challenges as "extremely severe" would be an error. The phrase does not capture the enormity of the kinds of challenges that lie ahead. And any serious discussion of the future of humanity must begin by recognizing a critical fact, that the human species is now facing a question that has never before arisen in human history, a question that has to be answered quickly: Will human society survive for long?

Well, as you all know, for 70 years we've been living under the shadow of nuclear war. Those who have looked at the record can only be amazed that we've survived this far. Time after time it's come extremely close to terminal disaster, even minutes away. It's kind of a miracle that we've survived. Miracles don't go on forever. This has to be terminated, and quickly. The recent Nuclear Posture Review of the Trump administration dramatically increases the threat of conflagration, which would in fact be terminal for the species. We may remember that this Nuclear Posture

Review was sponsored by Jim Mattis, who was regarded as too civilized to be retained in the administration..

There were three major arms treaties: the ABM Treaty, Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; the INF Treaty, Intermediate Nuclear Forces; the New START treaty.

The US pulled out of the ABM Treaty in 2002. And anyone who believes that antiballistic missiles are defensive weapons is deluded about the nature of these systems. The US has just pulled out of the INF Treaty, established by Gorbachev and Reagan in 1987, which sharply reduced the threat of war in Europe, which would very quickly spread. Massive public demonstrations were the background for leading to a treaty that made a very significant difference. It's worth remembering that and many other cases where significant popular activism has made a huge difference. The lessons are too obvious to enumerate. The Trump administration withdrew from the INF Treaty; the Russians withdrew right afterwards.

If you take a close look, you find that each side has a kind of a credible case saying that the opponent has not lived up to the treaty. For those who want a picture of how the Russians might look at it, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the major journal on arms control issues, recently had a lead article by Theodore Postol

pointing out how dangerous the US installations of anti-ballistic missiles on the Russian border – how dangerous they are and can be perceived to be by the Russians. Notice, on the Russian border. Tensions are mounting. Both sides are carrying out provocative actions. In a rational world, what would happen would be negotiations between the two sides, with independent experts to evaluate the charges that each is making against the other, to lead to a resolution of these charges, to restore the treaty. That's in a rational world. But it's unfortunately not the world we're living in. No efforts at all have been made in this direction. And they won't be, unless there is significant pressure.

Well, that leaves the New START treaty. The New START treaty has already been designated by the figure in charge (who has modestly described himself as the greatest president in American history) the worst treaty that ever happened in human history, the usual designation for anything that was done by his predecessors. Trump added that we've got to get rid of it. If in fact this comes up for renewal right after the next election, a lot is at stake. A lot is at stake in whether that treaty will be renewed. It has succeeded in very significantly reducing the number of nuclear

weapons, to a level way above what they ought to be, but way below what they were before. And it could go on.

Meanwhile, global warming proceeds on its inexorable course. During this millennium, every single year, with one exception, has been hotter than the last one. There are recent scientific papers, by James Hansen and others, which indicate that the pace of global warming, which has been increasing since about 1980, may be sharply escalating and may be moving from linear growth to exponential growth, which means doubling every couple of decades. We're already approaching the conditions of 125,000 years ago, when the sea level was about roughly 25 feet higher than it is today. With the melting, the rapid melting, of the Antarctic's huge ice fields that point might be reached. The consequences of that are almost unimaginable. I mean, I won't even try to depict them, but you can figure out quickly what that means.

While this is going on, you regularly read in the press euphoric accounts of how the United States is advancing in fossil fuel production. It's now surpassed Saudi Arabia. We're in the lead of fossil fuel production. The big banks, JPMorgan Chase and others, are pouring money into new investments in fossil fuels, including the most dangerous, like Canadian tar sands. And this is all presented with great

euphoria, excitement. We're now reaching "energy independence." We can control the world, determine the use of fossil fuels in the world.

Barely a word on what the meaning of this is, which is quite obvious. It's not that the reporters, commentators don't know about it, that the CEOs of the banks don't know about it. Of course they do. But these are kind of institutional pressures that just are extremely hard to extricate themselves from. Try to put yourself in the position of, say, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, the biggest bank, which is spending large sums in investment in fossil fuels. He certainly knows everything that you all know about global warming. It's no secret. But what are the choices? Basically, he has two choices. One choice is to do exactly what he's doing. The other choice is to resign and be replaced by somebody else who will do exactly what he's doing. It's not an individual problem. It's an institutional problem, which can be met, but only under tremendous public pressure.

And we've recently seen, very dramatically, how the solution can be reached. A group of young people, the Sunrise Movement, organized, got to the point of sitting-in in congressional offices, and aroused some interest from the new progressive figures who were able to make it to Congress. Under a lot of popular pressure, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,

joined by Senator Ed Markey, actually placed the Green New Deal on the agenda. That's a remarkable achievement. Of course, it got hostile attacks from everywhere: it doesn't matter. A couple of years ago, it was unimaginable that it would be discussed. As the result of the activism of this group of young people, it's now right in the center of the agenda. It's got to be implemented in one form or another. It's essential for survival, maybe not in exactly that form, but some modification of it.

Meanwhile, the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists last January was set at two minutes to midnight. That's as close as it's been to terminal disaster since 1947. The announcement of the settlement – of the setting – mentioned the two major familiar threats: the threat of nuclear war, which is increasing, and the threat of global warming, which is increasing further. And it added a third for the first time: the undermining of democracy. That's the third threat, along with global warming and nuclear war. And that was quite appropriate, because functioning democracy offers the only hope of overcoming these threats. They are not going to be dealt with by major institutions, state or private, acting without massive public pressure, which means that the means of democratic functioning have to be kept alive, used the

way the Sunrise Movement did it, the way the great mass demonstration in the early '80s did it, and the way we continue today.

The novel coronavirus is bringing about a hideous calamity — which was foreseen, and could have been prevented. Credible worst-case analyses find that millions may die, as usual with the poor and more vulnerable suffering the most, worldwide. There have been other health catastrophes in human history. The “Black Death” killed at least a third of the population of Europe, which recovered. There will be recovery in this case too, at a terrible human cost.

We also face other threats, which are incomparably more severe, even if not as disruptive to daily life — today. One is the threat of virtually total destruction by nuclear war, which is ominous and increasing. Another is the threat of environmental catastrophe, which is imminent and devastating.

There will be no recovery. And there is no time to waste in dealing with the threats decisively.

In the face of the immense tragedy of COVID-19, it may seem cruel to place the calamity in perspective, and also to urge a search for its roots. But realism is nonetheless imperative, at least if we hope to avert further disasters.

At the roots are colossal market failures and deeper malignancies of the socioeconomic order, raised from crisis to disaster by the brutal capitalism of the neoliberal age. Matters worth considering, particularly in the most powerful country in world history, which faces a decision as to whether to allow the battering ram to continue to be wielded with full devastating force.

Note: This piece was adapted for Truthout from an excerpt from Internationalism or Extinction by Noam Chomsky, edited by Charles Derber, Suren Moodliar and Paul Shannon, and published by Routledge, copyright © 2020. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

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Noam Chomsky is the laureate professor of linguistics in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Arizona. Among his books are *Hegemony or Survival* and *Failed States*. His newest book is **[Who Rules the World?](#)**

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