The fate of humanity hangs in the balance

Noam Chomsky

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We are meeting at a remarkable moment, a moment that is, in fact, unique in human history, a moment both ominous in portent and bright with hopes for a better future. The Progressive International has a crucial role to play in determining which course history will follow. We are meeting at a moment of confluence of crises of extraordinary severity, with the fate of the human experiment quite literally at stake. The issues are coming to a head in the next few weeks in the two great imperial powers of the modern era.

Fading Britain, having publicly declared that it rejects international law, is on the verge of a sharp break from Europe, on the path to becoming even more of a US satellite that it already is. But of course what is of the greatest significance for the future is what happens in the global hegemon, diminished by Trump's wrecking ball, but still with overwhelming power and incomparable advantages. Its fate, and with it the fate of the world, may well be determined in November.

Not surprisingly, the rest of the world is concerned, if not appalled. It would be difficult to find a more sober and respected commentator than Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* of London. He writes that the West is facing a serious crisis, and if Trump is re-elected, "this will be terminal." Strong words, and he is not even referring to the major crises humanity faces. Wolf is referring to the global order, a critical matter though not on the scale of the crises that threaten vastly more serious consequences, the crises that are driving the hands of the famous Doomsday Clock towards midnight — towards termination.

Wolf's concept "terminal" is not a new entry into public discourse. We have been living under its shadow for 75 years, ever since we learned, on an unforgettable August day, that human intelligence had devised the means that would soon yield the capacity for terminal destruction. That was shattering enough, but there was more. It was not then understood that humanity was entering a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, in which human activities are despoiling the environment in a manner that is now also approaching terminal destruction.

The hands of the Doomsday Clock were first set shortly after atomic bombs were used in a paroxysm of needless slaughter. The hands have oscillated since, as global circumstances have evolved. Every year that Trump has been in office, the hands have been moved closer to midnight. Two years ago they reached the closest they had ever been. Last January, the analysts abandoned minutes, turning to seconds: 100 seconds to midnight. They cited the same crises as before: the growing threats of nuclear war and of environmental catastrophe, and the deterioration of democracy.

The last might at first seem out of place, but it is not. Declining democracy is a fitting member of the grim trio. The only hope of escaping the two threats of termination is vibrant democracy in which concerned and informed citizens are fully engaged in deliberation, policy formation, and direct action.

That was last January. Since then, President Trump has amplified all three threats, not a mean accomplishment. He has continued his demolition of the arms control regime that has offered some protection against the threat of nuclear war, while also pursuing development of new and even more dangerous weapons, much to the delight of military industry. In his dedicated commitment to destroy the environment that sustains life, Trump has opened up vast new areas for drilling, including the last great nature reserve. Meanwhile his minions are systematically dismantling the regulatory system that somewhat mitigates the destructive impact of fossil fuel use, and that protects the population from toxic chemicals and from pollution, a curse that is now doubly murderous in the course of a severe respiratory epidemic.

Trump has also carried forward his campaign to undermine democracy. By law, presidential appointments are subject to Senate confirmation. Trump avoids this inconvenience by leaving the positions open and filling the offices with "temporary appointments" who answer to his will — and if they do not do so with sufficient fealty to the lord, are fired. He has purged the executive of any independent voice. Only sycophants remain. Congress had long ago established Inspectors General to monitor the performance of the executive branch. They began to look into the swamp of corruption that Trump has created in Washington. He took care of that quickly by firing them. There was scarcely a peep from the Republican Senate, firmly in Trump's pocket, with hardly a flicker of integrity remaining, terrified by the popular base Trump has mobilized.

This onslaught against democracy is only the bare beginning. Trump's latest step is to warn that he may not leave office if he is not satisfied with the outcome of the November election. The threat is taken very seriously in high places. To mention just a few examples, two highly respected retired senior military commanders released an open letter to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley, reviewing his constitutional responsibility to send the army to remove by force a "lawless president" who refuses to leave office after electoral defeat, summoning in his defense the kinds of paramilitary units he dispatched to Portland Oregon to terrorize the population over the strong objection of elected officials.

Many establishment figures regard the warning as realistic, among them the high-level Transition Integrity Project, which has just reported the results of the "war gaming" it has been conducting on possible outcomes of the November election. The project members are "some of the most accomplished Republicans, Democrats, civil servants, media experts, pollsters and strategists around," the Project co-director explains, including prominent figures in both Parties. Under any plausible scenario apart from a clear Trump victory, the games led to something like civil war, with Trump choosing to end "the American experiment." Again, strong words, never before heard from sober mainstream voices. The very fact that such thoughts arise is ominous enough. They are not alone. And given incomparable US power, far more than the "American experiment" is at risk.

Nothing like this has happened in the often troubled history of parliamentary democracy. Keeping to recent years, Richard Nixon — not the most delightful person in presidential history — had good reason to believe that he had lost the 1960 election only because of criminal manipulation by Democratic operatives. He did not contest the results, putting the welfare of the country ahead of personal ambition. Albert Gore did the same in 2000. Not today.

Forging new paths in contempt for the welfare of the country does not suffice for the megalomaniac who dominates the world. Trump has also announced once again that he may disregard the Constitution and "negotiate" for a third term if he decides he is entitled to it. Some choose to laugh all this off as the playfulness of a buffoon. To their peril, as history shows.

The survival of liberty is not guaranteed by "parchment barriers," James Madison warned. Words on paper are not enough. It is founded on the expectation of good faith and common decency. That has been torn to shreds by Trump along with his co-conspirator Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who has turned the "world's greatest deliberative body," as it calls itself, into a pathetic joke. McConnell's Senate refuses even to consider legislative proposals. Its concern is largesse to the rich and stacking the judiciary, top to bottom with far right young lawyers who should be able to safeguard the reactionary Trump-McConnell agenda for a generation, whatever the public wants, whatever the world needs for survival.

The abject service to the rich of the Trump-McConnell Republican party is quite remarkable, even by the neoliberal standards of exaltation of greed. One illustration is provided by the leading specialists on tax policy, economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman. They show that in 2018, following the tax scam that was the one legislative Trump-McConnell achievement, "for the first time in the last hundred years, billionaires have paid less [in taxes] than steel workers, school teachers, and retirees," erasing "a century of fiscal history." "In 2018, for the first time in the modern history of the United States, capital has been taxed less than labor" — a truly impressive victory of class war, called "liberty" in hegemonic doctrine.

The Doomsday Clock was set last January before the scale of the pandemic was understood. Humanity will sooner or later recover from the pandemic, at terrible cost. It is needless cost. We see that clearly from the experience of countries that took decisive action when China provided the world with the relevant information about the virus on January 10. Primary among them were East-Southeast Asia and Oceania, with others trailing along, and bringing up the rear a few utter disasters, notably the US, followed by Bolsonaro's Brazil and Modi's India.

Despite the malfeasance or indifference of some political leaders, there will ultimately be some kind of recovery from the pandemic. We will not, however, recover from the melting of the polar icecaps, or the exploding rate of arctic fires that are releasing enormous amounts of greenhouses gasses into the atmosphere, or other steps on our march to catastrophe.

When the most prominent climate scientists warn us to "Panic Now," they are not being alarmist. There is no time to waste. Few are doing enough, and even worse, the world is cursed by leaders who are not only refusing to take sufficient action but are deliberately accelerating the race to disaster. The malignancy in the White House is far in the lead in this monstrous criminality.

It is not only governments. The same is true of fossil fuel industries, the big banks that finance them, and other industries that profit from actions that put the "survival of humanity" at serious risk, in the words of a leaked internal memo of America's largest bank. Humanity will not long survive this institutional malignancy. The means to manage the crisis are available. But not for long. One primary task of the Progressive International is to ensure that we all panic now — and act accordingly.

The crises we face in this unique moment of human history are of course international. Environmental catastrophe, nuclear war, and the pandemic have no borders. And in a less transparent way, the same is true of the third of the demons that stalk the earth and drive the second hand of

the Doomsday clock towards midnight: the deterioration of democracy. The international character of this plague becomes evident when we examine its origins.

Circumstances vary, but there are some common roots. Much of the malignancy traces back to the neoliberal assault on the world's population launched in force 40 years ago. The basic character of the assault was captured in the opening pronouncements of its most prominent figures. Ronald Reagan declared in his inaugural address that government is the problem, not the solution — meaning that decisions should be removed from governments, which are at least partially under public control, to private power, which is completely unaccountable to the public, and whose sole responsibility is self-enrichment, as chief economist Milton Friedman proclaimed. The other was Margaret Thatcher, who instructed us that there is no society, only a market in which people are cast to survive as best they can, with no organizations that enable them to defend themselves against its ravages. Unwittingly no doubt, Thatcher was paraphrasing Marx, who condemned the autocratic rulers of his day for turning the population into a "sack of potatoes," defenseless against concentrated power.

With admirable consistency, the Reagan and Thatcher administrations moved at once to destroy the labor movement, the primary impediment to harsh class rule by the masters of the economy. In doing so, they were adopting the leading principles of neoliberalism from its early days in interwar Vienna, where the founder and patron saint of the movement, Ludwig von Mises, could scarcely control his joy when the proto-fascist government violently destroyed Austria's vibrant social democracy and the despicable trade unions that were interfering with sound economics by defending the rights of working people. As von Mises explained in his 1927 neoliberal classic *Liberalism*, five years after Mussolini initiated his brutal rule, "It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar movements aimed at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has for the moment saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history" — though it will be only temporary, he assured us. The Blackshirts will go home after having accomplished their good work.

The same principles inspired enthusiastic neoliberal support for the hideous Pinochet dictatorship. A few years later, they were put into operation in a different form in the global arena under the leadership of the US and UK.

The consequences were predictable. One was sharp concentration of wealth alongside of stagnation for much of the population, reflected in the political realm by undermining of democracy. The impact in the United States brings out very clearly what one would expect when business rule is virtually uncontested. After 40 years, 0.1% of the population have 20% of the wealth, twice what they had when Reagan was elected. CEO remuneration has skyrocketed, drawing general management wealth along with it. Real wages for non-supervisory male workers have declined. A majority of the population survives from paycheck to paycheck, with almost no reserves. Financial institutions, largely predatory, have exploded in scale. There have been repeated crashes, increasing in severity, the perpetrators bailed out by the friendly taxpayer, though that is the least of the implicit state subsidy they receive.

"Free markets" led to monopolization, with reduced competition and innovation, as the strong swallowed the weak. Neoliberal globalization has deindustrialized the country within the framework of the investor rights agreements mislabeled as "free trade pacts." Adopting the neoliberal doctrine that "taxation is robbery," Reagan opened the door to tax havens and shell companies — previously banned and barred by effective enforcement. That led at once to a huge tax evasion in-

dustry to expedite massive robbery of the general population by the very rich and the corporate sector. Not small change. The scale is estimated in tens of trillions of dollars.

And so it continues as neoliberal doctrine took hold.

As the assault was just beginning to take shape, in 1978, the president of the United Auto Workers, Doug Fraser, resigned from a labor-management committee that was set up by the Carter Administration, expressing his shock that business leaders had "chosen to wage a one-sided class war in this country — a war against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young and the very old, and even many in the middle class of our society," and had "broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during a period of growth and progress" — during the period of class collaboration under regimented capitalism.

His recognition of how the world works was somewhat belated, in fact too late to fend off the bitter class war launched by business leaders who were soon granted free rein by compliant governments. The consequences over much of the world come as little surprise: widespread anger, resentment, contempt for political institutions while the primary economic ones are hidden from view by effective propaganda. All of this provides fertile territory for demagogues who can pretend to be your savior while stabbing you in the back, meanwhile deflecting the blame for your conditions to scapegoats: immigrants, blacks, China, whoever fits long-standing prejudices.

Returning to the major crises we face at this historic moment, all are international, and two internationals are forming to confront them. One is opening today: the Progressive International. The other has been taking shape under the leadership of Trump's White House, a Reactionary International comprising the world's most reactionary states.

In the Western Hemisphere, the International includes Bolsonaro's Brazil and a few others. In the Middle East, prime members are the family dictatorships of the Gulf; al-Sisi's Egyptian dictatorship, perhaps the harshest in Egypt's bitter history; and Israel, which long ago discarded its social democratic origins and shifted far to the right, the predicted effect of the prolonged and brutal occupation. The current agreements between Israel and Arab dictatorships, formalizing long-standing tacit relations, are a significant step towards solidifying the Middle East base of the Reactionary International. The Palestinians are kicked in the face, the proper fate of those who lack power and do not grovel properly at the feet of the natural masters.

To the East, a natural candidate is India, where Prime Minister Modi is destroying India's secular democracy and turning the country into a racist Hindu nationalist state, while crushing Kashmir. The European contingent includes Orban's "illiberal democracy" in Hungary and similar elements elsewhere. The International also has powerful backing in the dominant global economic institutions.

The two internationals comprise a good part of the world, one at the level of states, the other popular movements. Each is a prominent representative of much broader social forces, which have sharply contending images of the world that should emerge from the current pandemic. One force is working relentlessly to construct a harsher version of the neoliberal global system from which they have greatly benefited, with more intensive surveillance and control. The other looks forward to a world of justice and peace, with energies and resources directed to serving human needs rather than the demands of a tiny minority. It is a kind of class struggle on a global scale, with many complex facets and interactions.

It is no exaggeration to say that the fate of the human experiment depends on the outcome of this struggle.

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