

Noam Chomsky's Theory of the Good Life

The Ezra Klein Show

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EZRA KLEIN: I'm Ezra Klein, and this is "The Ezra Klein Show."

The first political book I ever received was "9-11" by Noam Chomsky. My older brother gave it to me, just a little bit after 9/11. And I read it, and I reread it. And I argued with people over it. And then over the years, I would dip into the Noam Chomsky library. And just always its breadth is so astonishing.

Noam Chomsky, he's written more political books than I can count, and politics isn't even his main research interest. He's a pioneering linguist who put that entire field on a new footing. He's done very important work. He's a media theorist. He's made waves in the artificial intelligence world. It's really a remarkable example of a mind just continually at work. And it's still true. Chomsky is 92, and he's still writing books and giving interviews and trying to make his dent in the world.

If you just know Noam Chomsky as a symbol of a certain kind of leftism or as a critic of American imperialism, you're going to miss a lot. There's a coexistence in his arguments of the world he wants to build and then the urgency of what needs to change right now, which includes compromising. He's a utopian thinker but a very pragmatic actor. He spent much of 2020, for instance, trying to convince the left to vote for Joe Biden. He says, he's a conservative when it comes to social change, and you'll hear that here. There's a resistance in his thinking to making sweeping pronouncements about how things should or will work in his ideal world because he doesn't think that's how change can actually function.

Which is, all to say, there's a deep independence to Chomsky's thinking that I've always admired. Whether I agreed with the conclusions he came to or not, he is always and everywhere himself, both when that's easy and when that's hard. But the core of Chomskyism, as I've always understood it, is an idea about what human beings are and what we want, an idea based and his work on language and how we think but then feeding into his beliefs about the political architecture that would best support human flourishing. And for him, that's anarchism, but not anarchism in the way the word is often used now or just is a synonym for chaos or for lack of organization. Anarchism as the libertarian wing of socialism, as a way of putting freedom and equality into fundamental forms of cooperation rather than fundamental forms of competition.

So that's where we begin here, but obviously not where we end. This is a conversation about both the world Chomsky wants us to build in the future and why, but also conversation about the world he hopes we can save right now with all the compromises and imperfections and

contradictions that run through it. As always, my email is ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com. Here's Noam Chomsky.

EZRA KLEIN: Let me begin with the base of your worldview. What sets human intelligence apart from, say, animal intelligence?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, there are basically two fundamental things that are species properties of humans, common to the species, no analog elsewhere. One of them is what we're now using language. It's essentially the core of our being. It sets us totally apart from the animal world. Another species property is simply thought. As far as we know, there's no thinking in the world or maybe in the universe in anything comparable to what we have. And the two are closely linked — language is the instrument of thought and the means for formulating thought in our mind, sometimes externalizing at others.

These two capacities seem to have emerged together probably about the same time as Homo sapiens. There are common to all humans, apart from severe pathology. And there are no analogs in the animal world. In fact, there may not be anywhere for as we know.

EZRA KLEIN: How does your work on language feed into your understanding of human flourishing, of what humans want?

NOAM CHOMSKY: One of the striking things about language which greatly impressed the founders of the Scientific Revolution Galileo and his contemporaries is what is sometimes called the creative aspect of human thought. We are somehow capable of constructing in our minds an unbounded array of meaningful expressions. Mostly, it happens beyond consciousness. Sometimes, it emerges to consciousness. We can use these in a way which is appropriate to situations and constantly in new ways, often which of are new in the history of the language in our own history. Well, this creative character through the centuries has been connected speculatively, but not absurdly, to a fundamental instinct for freedom, which is part of our essential nature, resistance to domination and control by illegitimate authorities, fundamental element of human nature, maybe part of the same creative capacity, which shows up very strikingly in our normal use of language.

EZRA KLEIN: If that is so fundamental to our nature, as opposed to just one of the pieces of our nature, then why do we. Why do maybe I, spend so much time stifling those tendencies — doomscrolling on Twitter, and watching TV shows and zoning out, moving into single family houses far away from everybody? If we want freedom and we want creativity, why do we often gravitate towards things that feel like they take those away from us?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well a lot of it is beaten out of us from childhood. Take a look at children, constantly asking why they want explanations, they want to understand things. You go to school, your regimented. You're taught this is the way you're supposed to behave, not other ways. The institutions of the society are constructed, so as to reduce, modify, limit the efforts and control of one's own destiny. Take something as simple as having a job, we consider that now the highest goal in life. High school student asks your advice, you say, he better be prepared to get a job.

For about 2,000 years from the Romans into the late 19th century, the idea of having a job was considered an abomination. You're placing yourself in a position of subordination to a master. The fundamental attack on human dignity, on human rights. No person with any integrity and

self-respect should submit themselves to this. These are old issues. [INAUDIBLE] David Hume, my favorite philosopher, wrote one of, maybe the first, modern tract than what we now call political science, foundations of government. He opened in the first paragraph by posing a kind of a paradox.

He said, he is surprised by the easiness with which men subordinate themselves to government and the other powers. This is since power is in the hands of the governed, the general population, why do they submit themselves to power and authority? And he says, the only answer for this, he says, is enforced consent. Society is structured so that people will consent to what is in opposition to their fundamental nature, subordinate themselves to others. Later, this was Antonio Gramsci, in his Mussolini's prison cells, developed the same conception in much detail talking about how, what he called, hegemonic common sense is imposed in opposition to people's needs and right.

EZRA KLEIN: Let me ask you about what makes you confident that these wants are beaten out of people as opposed to that their competing wants to get satisfied and often obscure other parts of our nature. And I'll give an example here. I have a two-year-old son. It's a wonderful age. And part of what he wants to do is create and learn. I mean, I get asked the question, "What that?," 400 times a day, at least. But also, we've made the mistake of letting him see cartoons, once or twice. And every morning is a fight to not put on the TV. Like, he screams. And he's mad.

I have friends who have older kids. They want those kids to go build things. And they want to send them to like enriching summer camps. And they want them to read books. And the kids want to play video games. And it's always a fight. And I do think your politics leads in a different direction.

If what you think is that the sort of capitalist structure is making people want things they don't really want and suppressing their true wants versus if you think, and I probably lean more towards this, that there are a lot of things we want. And one of the hard things about building a politics focused on human enrichment of the kind that you describe here is that a lot of companies are able to give us consumer electronics and other kinds of entertainments that unfortunately are things people really do want and really do embrace. And it's hard to get folks to put those to the side and participate in more classical form of politics in small d, democracy you're talking about.

NOAM CHOMSKY: What you're saying is life is complicated.

EZRA KLEIN: [LAUGHS] There.

NOAM CHOMSKY: The relation between you and your children, that is a relation of authority and domination. And it has some justification. That's not a legitimate authority. It can be used illegitimately, but it is — the core of it, yes, there's a relation of domination, which has its justification for survival. It can be used in such a way as to encourage independence, creativity, or it can be used in a way to impose authority and control. The child will pick away within these conflicting influences.

However, when you move to the structure of society, say, the creation of wants by corporate power, there's no legitimacy to that relation of authority. That's a relation of central power. I think we have a huge industry in the United States — public relations industry, advertising industry. We know what it's for. Its founders told us. The founders of the industry, like Edward Bernays in the 1920s, when the industry was developing, one of the main leaders, wrote a major book on

this called “Propaganda.” In those days propaganda didn’t have the negative connotations that it has today. It just meant persuasion.

He discusses there what he calls engineering of consent. This is our task as responsible men is to engineer junior the consent of the masses. He did it for example by a major project which succeeded in getting women to smoke. Models walking down 5th Avenue holding cigarettes, saying, this is the way to be a modern woman and so on. And he did succeed in getting women to smoke. It’s one of the first major successes in engineering consent. We can count up the number of corpses that led to it.

At the same time that he was writing, the leading public intellectual of the 20th century Walter Lippmann was writing on what he called manufacture of consent, which he described as a new art in the practice of democracy. It’s a way to ensure, as he put it, that the bewildered herd, the general population, will be controlled. That we, the responsible men, will not be subjected to the trampling on the roar of the bewildered herd. Now, their task is to be spectators, not participants.

EZRA KLEIN: Let me try to hold two pieces of this together because one of the things, I think, is interesting here is— I agree with you pretty fundamentally, and we’re here at the show has advertising on it. My paper has advertising in it. If you go back to mid century American economics and critiques of capitalism, there’s much more of a sense of advertising as a shaping force. I still like John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* a lot, in part for these reasons. I mean, I think it understands something that we’ve lost, which is that the wants that arise within capitalism are not just natural.

The part of this had push on a little bit is they’re also not just manufactured. I mean, I’ve started publications. I’ve worked a lot with advertisers who were advertising. They don’t have that much control. They try a lot of things. Some of them work, some of them don’t. If you get people hooked on cigarettes, the advertising helps. But the nicotine is really doing a lot of work for you. But there are tons of movies that have gigantic advertising budgets and they flop. There are tons of political projects and political candidates. Like, in my State of California, Meg Whitman spent about \$150 million of her own money to lose by more than 10 percentage points. I mean, Jeb Bush’s campaign spent about the same amount only to see him drop out early in the primary.

So there is a relationship here where the public has some power, too. And what ends up happening, it always seems to me is sort of in the Venn diagram of what power wants and what there’s money to try to get people to want, but also what the public wants. And a lot of that stuff is not great, but I don’t think it’s quite as much a capacity for mind control, as some of the more totalizing versions of this theory hold.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, I agree with that. These are efforts. Efforts don’t have to succeed. But what we’re talking about is the massive extraordinary effort that goes into creating wants, shaping opinion, ensuring that doctrines are not questioned. A separate question is whether it works. Well, that’s a mixed story. Sometimes, it does. Sometimes, it doesn’t. But underlying it is the fact that one of the major factors components of our social order is a huge attempt to manufacture consent to create wants, to ensure doctrinal conformity.

And it often does work. Cigarettes is a case where it worked. In fact, it’s very interesting to look at these cases. Take cigarettes, again, I’m sure you remember the Marlboro man, where does that come from? Well, that actually comes from the creation of the gun culture. In the 19th century, it was an agricultural country. Farmers had guns and chased the critters away. There

was a huge gun manufacturing industry — fancy Winchester, Remington, Colt, and so on. They had a big market during the Civil War. Well, Civil War was over, the market collapsed.

There were wars going on all over Europe. They bought fancy guns from the American manufacturers. By the late 19th century, that had stopped. Europe had moved into a temporarily peaceful period. The gun manufacturers were in trouble. They didn't have a market. Farmers didn't want their fancy stuff. What were they going to do? What they did first was concoct a fabricated image of the Wild West — sheriffs fast on the draw and noble cowboys, all this kind of stuff.

Bottom line of this is you better get your son a Winchester rifle or he won't be a real man. And you better get your daughter a little pink pistol or she won't be a proper woman and so on. That was essentially the thrust of the advertising campaign. It had an enormous effect. We're living with it right now. The whole story from the beginning is fabrication. I mean, you go back to the actual 19th century, cowboys were not the lone ranger running around to save people. It was a guy who couldn't get a job, so maybe someone would hire him to push cows around or something like that. But we live with these stories.

EZRA KLEIN: You're an anarchist. How do you define anarchism?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Anarchism, the way I understand it, is pretty close to a truism. That's it. And I think everybody, if they think about it, will accept at least this much. We begin with assuming that any structure of authority and domination has to justify itself. It's not self-justifying. It has a burden of proof. It has to show that it's legitimate. So if you're taking a walk with your kid, and the kid run in the street, and you grab his arm and pull him back, that's an exercise of authority. But it's legitimate. You can have a justification.

And there are such cases where there is justification. But if you look closely, most of them do not. Most of them are what David Hume, Edward Bernays, Walter Lippmann, Adam Smith, and others have been talking about over the centuries. Namely, illegitimate authority. Well, illegitimate authorities should be exposed, challenged, overcome. That's true in all of life. We've talked about a few cases. Like, say, the workplace, where it's illegitimate, should not be tolerated, wasn't tolerated, until it was driven out of people's heads by force and violence. Well, OK, what's anarchism? Just pushing these questions to their limit.

EZRA KLEIN: Who decides when authority is legitimate? In some of the more classic theories of democracy, if you have the consent of the governed and the exercise of authority on their behalf is legitimate. I think there are many of those cases that you wouldn't agree with. So under anarchism, how are those decisions made?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Here, we go back to the first question you raised, about the unique human properties, like the capacity for thought. You have to think it through. There's no algorithm. Life is too complicated for simple algorithms. You take a look at the situation, think it through, deliberate it with others in a free society, where people have access to information, have gained control of their lives. They think it through and decide. Take the case of subordinating yourself to a master for most of your waking life. Well, workingmen, in the 19th century, young women from the farms, factory girls that were called. They did think it through.

And we can see what their thinking was by reading the very eloquent and forceful literature that they created. They bitterly attacked the imposition of what they called monarchic rule in the workplace, where their basic rights were taken away by subordination to a master, which they regarded as not fundamentally different from slavery, except that it was maybe temporary, you could get free of it. The working people held that we should move towards, what they called, a

cooperative Commonwealth, where people control their own lives. Workers should control the enterprises in which they work. Their conception was that anyone who appropriates the labor of someone else is in a position of illegitimate authority. And out of that came the whole picture. Well, that's how you answer the questions, by deliberation among people who are putting their minds to work. Can you assure the right answer will come out? Of course, not.

EZRA KLEIN: But people do come to very different answers with this. I mean, you talk about anarchism is the libertarian wing of socialism. And then I know people who end up being the libertarian wing of capitalism and end up very much on the other side. And they're smart folks, too. And one of the critiques you'll hear is that you need a certain amount of hierarchy and organization, which I think in many cases, you would call domination, for complex economic levels of structure.

So say, developing and then distributing an mRNA vaccine during a pandemic, you need a certain amount of a true hierarchy for that. And not everybody can be equal in that decision-making. Somebody needs to run the organization. Somebody needs to run the lab. And that's difficult if you're sort of doing every decision sort of from scratch in real time. How do you think about that trade-off between complexity and deliberation?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I don't think it's a trade-off if it's done in a free democratic society. A free society can select people to have administrative and other authority to take over parts of the concern for the common good. And they can be recalled. But they're under popular control. They're not there because their grandfather built railroads or because in some, they managed to finesse the market so that they ended up with a ton of money. They're not there for that reason. They're there because they're delegated under popular authority, [INAUDIBLE], not of any amount of structure of hierarchy and domination you want.

You have this in, for example, a worker controlled enterprises. Some of them huge. Take, say, Mondragon, the largest of them, been around for about 60 years in Northern Spain, worker-owned, worker-managed, huge conglomerate, industrial production, banks, housing, hospitals, everything. It's not perfect by any means, but it does have — it's based on the fundamental principle of popular democratic control and authorization to carry out managerial functions when needed. And it actually have that in just about any decently functioning research lab in a university, works pretty much the same way. Maybe a department chair was chosen to handle the administrative work, if faculty doesn't like him, you pick somebody else. These are certainly possible structures of all kinds. They don't undermine the possibility of organization. In fact, anarchist society should be highly organized, but under popular control of a free informed community, which can interact without illegitimate forces controlling them.

EZRA KLEIN: If it trends back in that direction, how do you keep it from becoming representative democracy again?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Representative democracy does not exist. Let's take our democracy, is that a representative democracy?

EZRA KLEIN: Not really.

NOAM CHOMSKY: And for very good reasons, and we can discuss it. But if you had a real representative democracy, then it would be very much like this. The community would select people to carry out this test because they're good at it or maybe they want it, and others don't, others want something else. But it would be under popular supervision, recall, if necessary, and constant interaction. So I think there should be participation at all points.

Now, take your own example, distributing a vaccine. Well, people should have to have some say in this. How do we want it to be done? If somebody refuses to accept the vaccine, what should we do about it? Well, that's a live problem right now. Almost half of Republicans are going to refuse to accept the vaccine. What that says is we'll never get out of the Covid crisis because we'll never get a level of immunity, which will make it kind of like flu, maybe you take a shot every year. But it's not lethal. We'll never get to that.

Or suppose some individual says, I'm not going to wear a mask, what do we do about it? Well, those are problems that the community has to decide. Suppose somebody says, I'm not going to obey traffic laws, I don't like them. I'm going to run through red lights and drive on the left side of the road. I want to be free. Well, I have to make decisions about that. Saying, I'm not going to wear a mask is not very different from that. Says, I'm going to go out to the shopping mall, and if I infect you, it's your problem. Well, communities are going to have to make decisions about things like this.

EZRA KLEIN: I agree, but it feels to me like you've reinvented the system in many ways that we have. I mean, I agree that we don't have a strongly representative democracy, and I might have different reasons I believe that than you do, although we share quite a few. But this is very much my question about who decides on legitimacy. If we're back in a system where some people say, well, you got to wear masks and be doing a business lockdown, and other people say, no, that's an unfair imposition of dominance over me, then it sounds to me like we're sort of talking about more marginal changes to what we have now, than certainly, the word anarchism sounds like.

NOAM CHOMSKY: What, would eliminating the job contract be marginal?

EZRA KLEIN: So tell me about that, how would you eliminate the job contract?

NOAM CHOMSKY: By the way, that 19th century, working people, factory girls, farmers wanted to do it. Participants should run their own enterprises. The groups of farmers would get together, work out ways to run their own cooperative control over marketing and development. People in the service industry should do the same thing. That's how we should move towards popular control of institutions. That would be a totally different world than the one we live in. It's not marginal.

But you're quite right that questions of conflict are going to come up all the time. Can't help it. Take the happiest family in the world. But there's going to be conflict inside. You figure out ways to resolve them. We wouldn't even want a world in which there are no conflicts. It would be too boring to live in. There are different opinions, different attitudes, different ideas. That's how creative work takes place. That's how changes take place. Life should be structured so that these can be handled in civilized ways, the way it is, say, in a happy family or a well-run enterprise, that decent faculty department, that decent worker-owned industry, lots of structures like that — farmers cooperative, farmers associations, many such things. We would like it to be structured as much as possible so that you're going to have civilized thoughtful interchange to try to work out the problems that exist.

EZRA KLEIN: So in a lot of classical economics, the idea is everything is built or much of our economy anyway is built on the freedom to contract. And if people freely chose to sign their name to something, then who are we in the government? Or who are we in society to say anything about it? You use a concept that's been around and critiques of capitalism for a long time, but you don't hear it that often in the mainstream, which is wage slavery, arguing that these are not actually free choices. Can you talk a bit about

the idea of wage slavery and where you differ from those who think our economy is built on the freedom to contract?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Freedom of contract is a joke. Those who enter into the free contract have radically different power relations. One of them is saying, I own this place, you can rent yourself to me if I'm willing to accept you. The other thing, I got a choice between renting myself, the subordination to power, or starving. Now, that's freedom of contract. No, I'm exaggerating. It's not entirely like that. There are lots of nuances. But that's it fundamentally.

Let me just describe to you an anecdote, if you don't mind. When I was a college student, many years ago, I heard a lecture by the leading guru of what's called Libertarianism in the United States, which is radically different from the Libertarian tradition. This is Ludwig von Mises was giving a lecture on why the government causes unemployment. So the problem of unemployment is entirely the fault of the government. The government is imposing things like minimum wages, conditions in the workplace, all sorts of things, and that imposes unemployment. Because if we had real freedom, real freedom of contract without government interference, if some guy is starving and he could get a job for \$0.10 an hour under horrible conditions, he'd picked the job. But the government won't let them. So the government is causing unemployment. And that was my introduction to what's called right-wing libertarian thought by the top master.

And in fact, that's the basic view. If you read the leading theorists — James Buchanan, one of the major thinkers in what's called Libertarianism here. I don't think that's the right word. He says, quite possibly that an economic system should be constructed so as to conform to human nature. That makes sense. And what's human nature? He tells us. This is every person's highest ideal is to be the master of a world of slaves. That's our highest ideal, in case you didn't notice it. And therefore, we have to design a society so everyone is free to pursue this fundamental human nature as fully as possible.

Well, it's a certain conception. It's not mine. I don't think it's yours. I don't think it's anybody's frankly, unless you're caught up in this ideology. But yes, that's a point of view. And it should be deliberated along with a point of view of the workers and farmers of 19th century America, who I think are much more representative of what's natural to humans.

EZRA KLEIN: Well, let me offer one of the stronger justifications for capitalism because I agree with you that idea of freedom is so narrow as to be a mockery. I think the stronger arguing people make for different forms of capitalism or mixed economies in the way we have them now is it the same incentives that in many cases do lead to exploitation and do lead to inequality also drive technological and organizational innovation. And from generation to generation, it's those technological innovations, those organizational innovations that really change living standards. And it's not the government doesn't have a role, but that role is more basic. They fund basic research. And then the market drives that it forward. And that it's a trade-off worth making because we're supercharging human beings drive to status and drive to attain and harnessing it to create the technology that moves our species forward. How do you think about that?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I think it's just false. I mean, I spent my life in the main research institution in the world, MIT and research labs. You just go into a research lab. People aren't working, maybe people are working 80 hours a week. But it's not to make money. They can make a lot more money elsewhere. It's because of the excitement of the work. The challenge of solving problems. That's what drives people. It has no relation to the incentive to gain power. Yes, both are incentives, but they're totally different.

And I think if you look at your children, you mentioned this constant why, why, why — yeah, that's what people want. They want to understand the world. They see problems, the problem can be, let's say, finding how the Covid virus works. That drives people to work hard because they want to understand it. They may not make any money out of it. And most of them, never do. I mean, we have a distorted system, which encourages them to try to make money out of it, but that's not what's driving it in the lab.

Or it can be terrible mechanical things. I can't get anything to work. So my car isn't working. I take it to a mechanic. He see something's wrong, sees a problem, wants to solve the problem, takes skill, takes kind of intelligence I don't have. But just the interest in solving the problem drives it. Of course, he gets paid, but that's part of the structure of the outside system. I don't think that's the driving force. You look at the development of technology, that's the way it happened.

Take, say, the internet. It was actually going on in the labs where it was. And people were really interested in the problem of working out modes of interconnection at first among scientists and more broadly. Most of them are unknown and didn't make any money out of it. Same with the development of computers, same with almost all technological development, even to the famous levels. And take, say, Einstein working in the patent office in Switzerland, thinking about what would you observe if you were traveling at the speed of light. He wasn't doing it to make money. That's the way everything from your children up to advanced research works. That's where technological development and scientific development takes place.

Now, actually, this is distorted by social structures. So in the early '80s, government laws were changed so that universities could get patents and researchers could get patents on the work that they were doing. OK. That had a cheapening effect. It meant that you really were imposing a structure in which people were working in order to make money, not to solve problems. And I think I don't know how to measure exactly, but my impression is it had a cheapening effect on the nature of the university system. When you impose these external constraints, that, say, you should be like, what, James Buchanan says you are, a person who's highest ideal is to be a master of slaves, well, you impose those outside structures, it does affect things.

EZRA KLEIN: Let's say, the U.S. had the social democratic system that we see in Denmark, what progress would still have to be made to get to the society you'd like to see us have?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I would like to see the kind of society that classical liberals wanted, like John Stuart Mill, for example, or Abraham Lincoln, or even Adam Smith among the last of the classical liberals. They wanted to see a society with, to quote Mill, in which the natural form of organization is free association among participants. That's the way the industrial system should move according to Mill. That's what they should do in Denmark. Instead of having a master-slave relation, master-serf relation, if you want to call it that. Or it should have a relation of direct participation and control. Now, maybe, the Danish don't want that. Up to them, I'm not their master. But I would like this option to be brought forth and liberated, discussed, developed. I think they probably would want it, just as free working people in the early days of the Industrial Revolution wanted. It's just their nature.

And let me say, again, this is a conception that goes back literally 2,000 years. There's a qualification I should add. Those who are calling for freedom from dependence and that being the most abominable situation that exists. They were living in slave societies. So there was a category of people whose proper status was to be slaves. They were also living in patriarchal societies with

the proper status of women was to be servants. So the talk about freedom is not without a good deal of hypocrisy.

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EZRA KLEIN: You've described yourself as having a rather conservative attitude towards social change. In what sense is your view of social change conservative?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I don't think that meaningful constructive social change can take place unless the large majority of the population have come to the realization that modifications of existing systems cannot achieve the kinds of goals that they think are right and just. At that point, you can have radical social change. If it's forced prior to that, I think it ends up in some kind of authoritarian structure again.

EZRA KLEIN: Do you think that today's left has an overly optimistic view of how fast social change can happen?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, these things can happen very quickly I think. Because I think the structure of authority and domination is very thin. I don't think it's deep. People do accept it because they don't think about alternatives. If alternatives are proposed, a lot of people can accept them pretty quickly. I think we've seen many cases of this, not total overthrow of the system, but substantial changes. Take my own lifetime, there have been major changes. When I was a kid, early '30s, I was born in 1928, the depression, the working class has been totally crushed. 1920s, Wilsonian repression, other violence that essentially destroyed the labor movement, it was a Gilded Age, much like today, radical inequality, deep suffering much worse than today. That was the early '30s.

Couple of years later, it was a very different country. We're still poor. My family was most first generation immigrant, mostly working-class, mostly unemployed. But by the mid '30s, the labor movement had reconstituted from ashes literally. We had militant labor action, CIO formation. It was leading up to the point of sit-down strikes, which are barely a step before saying, we don't need you bosses, we can run this place ourselves, right up to that. Then you started getting sharp changes, significant ones. Supreme Court stopped blocking New Deal efforts. You got the things that are a lot of the basis for our alliance today, ranging from Social Security to the T.V.A. and lot of things in between.

EZRA KLEIN: Let me ask you about the power structures today. So given your expectations for him, how would you assess Joe Biden's administration so far?

NOAM CHOMSKY: It's a split story. On domestic policy, it's doing better than I expected frankly. In fact, as Erik Loomis points out, Biden is the first president, probably since F.D.R., to take a strong stand in favor of unionization. Biden has people in his Council of Economic Advisors who are heterodox economists, broken out of the framework of the stirringly neoliberal doctrines. The program for Build Back America is a very good program, of course. In fact, the stimulus, that was just passed. It had many good parts to it. This didn't happen as a miracle. It didn't happen because Biden had a religious conversion. He's been a conservative Democrat, a Clintonite Democrat all his life.

What happened is very substantial popular pressure. That's where change takes place. There's lots of popular activism that's been pressing him and pressing him on every issue, including the most important issue there is destruction of the environment. If we don't take control of environmental destruction in the next decade or two, we're finished. It's that simple. We're going

to reach a tipping point from which there's no return. We're facing major catastrophe unless we take action now. It's known what to do. It's feasible within reach. It has to be done.

Well, Biden's climate program far from perfect, needs major changes, but it's far better than any predecessor. And the reason is because of popular activism. It's because of groups like Sunrise Movement, young people who occupy congressional offices. Out of that came something pretty dramatic, some form of Green New Deal, which is absolutely essential for survival — we're not going to survive any other way — moved from an object of ridicule way off in the margin, right to the legislative agenda. Nowhere near enough, but a long step forward. Well, that's the way changes take place.

EZRA KLEIN: I do want to ask you something about the shape of what's leading to some of even the good things in the Biden administration, which is it's a strange moment for, I think, theories of class politics for the Democratic Party has become more dominated by upper income, more educated suburbanites, but it's also moving left on economics at the same time. I think the classic understanding of this is it would be class-based, that as you go up the income scale, you become more economically conservative and probably conservative. And more recently, that's not been true. Particularly issues of race and other questions of identity are very powerful players here.

But there's just a UCLA Democracy Fund survey. And it found that, if you look at college-educated whites and noncollege whites, the same number roughly support a \$15 minimum wage, government health insurance about the same thing, it's very, very similar. And in some areas, you've begun to see more liberal or even more left positions among college educated folks. And I wonder if that's not forcing a different approach to a political coalition building. Do you think there is a different coalition that will get you to a more left outcome that has been true in the past? And if so, why?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, first of all, we should bear in mind that every example you gave illustrates how far to the right things have shifted. So take a minimum wage. Who's calling for a \$30 an hour minimum wage? Well, if we had continued what was happening in the '50s and the '60s into the '70s before the neoliberal assault began, with that trajectory, if continued, which is not utopian, we'd have probably about a \$30 an hour minimum wage. Expectations have been so lowered by the business from neoliberal assault that we don't even dream of that.

Take health care. It's pretty astonishing debate in the United States. Take Sanders's program, universal health care. Take the most liberal critical commentators, say, in The New York Times. They say it's a great idea, it's too radical for the American people. We can now move slowly. Why's it too radical for the American people? Mexico has it. Germany has it. England has it. Canada has it. It's almost everywhere. Why is it too radical for the American people? I mean, I think these are all examples of the extraordinary power of manufacture of consent, obvious things have been driven out of people's minds, not very far. I think they can come right back.

But what kind of coalition do we have? Well, my own very conservative feeling is it's going to be labor-based. That's been the cutting edge of social progress as far back as we want to go in modern times. And I think it will continue to be. Now, the labor force is different than it was in the 1930s, service industries, high-tech all over the place. But I don't think it fundamentally changes things. You can have a popular organization of working people everywhere. And it should be in solidarity. That's very critical.

You look at the names of the unions, a lot of them have the word "International" in their name. That should be made much more than a formalism. All of the problems we face today are

international. The pandemic is international. We're, in fact, committing suicide right now in the rich countries with eyes open knowing we're doing it by monopolizing vaccines. We don't give vaccine, spread vaccines to Africa, poor countries in Asia, it's going to come back and hit us like a sledgehammer. Everybody knows it, but we still monopolize them.

Take healing of the environment. That doesn't have any borders. We're going to have to not only eliminate at home any use of fossil fuels. It has to be eliminated within a couple of decades. But we have to make sure that it happens abroad.

EZRA KLEIN: Well, you just wrote a book on this. Do you think the U.S. political system and for that matter, the global political consortiums here are capable of addressing the climate crisis at the scale and speed we need?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, there are two answers to that question. If the answer is no, we can say goodbye to each other. It's simple as that. We know how to do it. The methods are there. They're feasible. Discussed in this book, the part of the book that's written by my co-author, Robert Pollin, an economist who has been working on this for years and discusses very feasible methods. Many of them now being implemented, which could overcome the crisis in a perfectly feasible way, lead to a better world. Others have done very similar things.

Jeff Sachs at Columbia Earth Sciences Institute has somewhat different models. They come out with about the same thing. That can be done. We know it has to be done. Those of us who are willing to face reality know that it has to be done within the next couple of decades. Then comes your question, are human beings capable of saving themselves from species suicide? It's what it amounts to. I don't know the answer to that. Nobody does.

EZRA KLEIN: What do you think of the degrowth movement?

NOAM CHOMSKY: There's something to it, but solving the climate crisis requires growth. It requires development of alternative energy systems. That's a huge amount of work. That means reconstruction of buildings and cities. That means efficient mass transportation. All kinds of growth are required. Now, what's required is the right kinds of growth, not the kind that wasteful consumption that you throw away tomorrow, not using nonbiodegradable plastics, not destructive agricultural processes, high fertilizer agricultural processes that are destroying the land. So you have to have the right kinds of growth.

EZRA KLEIN: How about some of the more far-reaching technological solutions people want to try? So there's things like solar geoengineering, where you're blasting particles into the sky to make the atmosphere more reflective. It's not clear that we have ways to do this with ocean acidification, but certainly people are trying to come up with that. There's one argument that the way out is not going to be so much for political change, it's going to be through exerting more aggressive technological manipulation of the environment in a intended way than we have been so far. Where do you come down on that?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Now, first of all, let me make it clear that what I think doesn't really matter that much.

EZRA KLEIN: Sure. But I'm interested.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, for good reasons, this requires technical expertise. I mean, I can read the physics journals, but I don't understand what they're saying. But I don't have the expertise to answer the question. However, you can find answers. Well, there are places where this is discussed in great detail. Maybe the most important general journal on this topic is The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. Go back maybe a year or so, there's a long article by Oxford professor of

physics Raymond Pierrehumbert, one of the leading figures in the IPCC report, who discusses exactly this. He runs through the alternative technologies that are proposed and looks at their upside and downside. You read it, you can get an expert opinion, not my opinion. What he says basically is that a lot is unknown, he says. It's part of a shot in the dark.

But he says one thing's pretty clear. If you put aerosol particles into the air to cut back sunlight, it's permanent. You can't withdraw them. You withdraw them, you have a catastrophe. That means we're instituting a permanent change in the whole ecology. And any modification of it would be catastrophic. That's a tremendous burden to put on future generations.

The other point about this is simply one of time scale. We have a couple of decades to answer these questions. These developments, even if they're feasible, even if they're the right thing to do, putting all doubt aside, it's not going to happen in a relevant time scale. Actually, that's one of the things that's wrong with the Biden program. Part of the Biden program and sort of deference to the fuel company and fossil fuel companies is to put a lot of emphasis into high technology possible potential changes of engineering type. That's not relevant to the climate crisis. Even if it's feasible, it's just the wrong time scale.

That's kind of like people who say on the left, we're not going to solve the climate crisis until we get rid of capitalism. That's capitalism inherently is self-destructive. Well, there's something to the argument that it's just not relevant. There's no conceivable possibility of the kind of social change that they're talking about within the time scale that's necessary to solve this problem. So we have to be willing to face reality on these matters, too. We have problems that are imminent, urgent. Couple of decades means urgent. This doesn't mean everybody's going to die in 20 years. It means processes will be set in motion that won't be reversible. And then it's just a matter of time till it's all over.

We are now in a position where we have to solve this now, very soon, this generation. And if the geoengineering solutions are not going to do it, it doesn't mean should stop working on them. There was an announcement of some new governmental fusion experimental effort, that's worth pursuing. If we can ever get fusion, a lot of problems would be solved. But we're not going to have it on any scale relevant within the time frame of dealing with this problem.

EZRA KLEIN: Let me ask you about another technology that I've heard you say could solve a lot of problems. Automation usually gets thought of in the way you could lose jobs from it. I've seen talk about it in an interesting, the optimistic way, that if you could harness the right politics around it, automation could be a way towards a better, more economically dignified future for people. How do you think about automation and its role in the future of the economy?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Any on Earth boring, destructive, dangerous work should be automated to the extent possible. That frees people up to do better work, more creative work, more fulfilling work, safer work. So that's all to the good. How automation takes place is a matter of social and economic policy. It can take place in many ways. Let me just mention one important careful study, which showed what the choices are that the former colleague of mine find historian of technology, David Noble, unfortunately died a couple of years ago. His major work was on the machine tool industry, the core of much of modern industrial capitalism.

By the 1950s, the machine tool industry was beginning to be automated. Numerical processing was coming in. Computers were coming in. Waves of potentially changing the machine-tool industry using the new tools that were coming along. There were two ways to do it. Both ways were experimented with. One way, de-skilled machinists that replaced skilled machinists, first

of all, by automation, but also by turning the people themselves into robots, who just followed orders and so on. That was one way. The other way to do it put more power into the hands of skilled machinists. OK. Still using the same technology. As Noble shows pretty convincingly, there was no economic reason to pick the first way. It was picked, it was picked. That's the way it was picked, but for power reasons.

The ownership management class wants to deskill people, wants to turn them into subordinate subjects, not independent agents and actors. So they pick the mode of automation which deskilled machinists still around, but not skilled, and turn them into servants rather than controllers and actors. That happens all the time. Let's take another case. 2009, the economy was collapsing. The auto industry essentially collapsed. That was pretty much nationalized, then use the term. But basically, the Obama administration took over most of the auto industry.

Well, there were a couple of choices. One choice was to turn it back to the former owners, bail them out, so taxpayer pays them out, give them term ownership and control back to them, maybe different faces but the same class, and have them go back to what they were doing before on producing cars to create traffic jams and pollution and destroy the environment. That was one choice. The choice that was taken. There was another choice. Turn the auto industry over to the work force, and the stakeholders, the community. Let them have control. Let them think through what they ought to do. Maybe they'll decide on the sensible thing.

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EZRA KLEIN: I'll make sure we get to talk a bit about foreign policy before our time together is up. So let me start here. We talked about the American jobs plan a couple of minutes ago that President Joe Biden has released. A lot of that plan is framed in terms of competition with China. It's a way to blunt an ascendant in China or at least to maintain our geopolitical centrality. How do you think about China as an economic and geopolitical competitor? Should they be seen as a threat to us? Should we not think about them in that context? How would you like to see our relationship with China look?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I mean, everyone talks about the threat. When everyone says the same thing about some complex topic, what should come to your mind is, wait a minute, nothing can be that simple. Something's wrong. That's the immediate light that should go off in your brain when you ever hear unanimity on some complex topic. So let's ask, what's the Chinese threat?

EZRA KLEIN: I'll give you the answer I've gotten because I have very complicated feelings about this. The answer I've gotten is that particularly, over the past decade, China's moved in a much more authoritarian direction. They've become more expansionist, domestically, I'm talking about there. They've become more expansionist in the South China Sea really launched a horrifying domestic repression campaign against the Uyghurs. And so to the extent, you want there to be a mega economy that is setting international rules and structures that the direction China is going makes it scary for China or scarier for China to be that rule setter in the future. That is, I think, the argument I've been given.

NOAM CHOMSKY: China is becoming more authoritarian internally. I think that's pretty bad. Is it a threat to us? No, it's not a threat to us. Let's take what's happening with the Uyghur. Pretty hard to get good evidence, but there's enough evidence to show that there's very severe

repression going on. Let me ask you a simple question. Is the situation of the Uyghurs, a million people who've been through education camps, is that worse than the situation of, say, two million and twice that many people in Gaza? I mean, are the Uyghur having their power plants destroyed, their sewage plants destroyed, subjected to regular bombing? Is it not happening to them? Not to my knowledge.

So yes, it shouldn't be happening. We should protest it. It has one crucial difference from Gaza. Namely, in the Uyghur case, there's not a lot that we can do about it, unfortunately. In the Gaza case, we can do everything about it since we were responsible for it, we can stop it tomorrow. That's the difference. OK? So yes, that's a very bad thing among other bad things in the world. But to say that it's a threat to us is a little misleading.

Well, let's talk to the one case of expansionism, which is real. The South China Sea, that's real. China is taking actions in violation of international law. It's trying to take control of the South China Sea. Or to put it differently, it's trying to do what we do in all of the oceans of the world, including the Western Pacific. They're trying to do that in the South China Sea. And they shouldn't be doing that. That's for sure. It's crucially important for their security. That's where all their commercial traffic goes right through — South China Sea, Straits of Malacca, which are controlled by Chinese enemies or allies. So yeah, they're doing the wrong thing there. That's the thing that's a little bit familiar to us because we do it all over the world, OK? And that's the kind of threat that should be dealt with by diplomacy and negotiations.

EZRA KLEIN: So what I want to say, I agree with a bunch of what you said here. That's why I said I have very complicated feelings in this conversation. There's a lot China does wrong, but the idea that America is going to tell people that they don't have legitimate national interest in controlling nearby waterways seems a little odd.

But I think that if you boil the conversation down to its core, the threat that the American government feels is that America is going to lose global pre-eminence. And they would prefer, and I think probably as an American, I would prefer, that America maintains more leadership of the international system than China does. I do think relatively I prefer American values as expressed by our government than Chinese. But I think this is a question I would pose to you, do you think America has a legitimate interest in trying to maintain geopolitical pre-eminence?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I don't think we can move that fast. Almost every phrase you use I think requires questions. So what American values do we impose when we run the world? Let's take Latin America nearby. What American values have we demonstrated in Latin America? Hideous crimes and atrocities, those are our values, what we impose. What I just mentioned in Gaza is our values. And that's what we impose. So when we talk about our values, let's look at what they are.

Actually, I gave a talk to some Latin American scholars a couple of days ago. And I brought up a discussion that appeared actually in The New York Times, which was kind of along these lines, one foreign policy writer wrote something about how there's this danger that the United States won't be able to bring its values to the world. They all burst out laughing. And they know what American values are, not the rhetoric, what happens, OK?

So first of all, should any country have domination of the world? I don't think so. Should it be a country that has a record of destruction, violence, and repression? No, it shouldn't. Should it be China? No, certainly not. Is there any sign of China taking dominant control of the world? Not that I can see. South China Sea, yes. And they shouldn't be doing that. No, we should deal

with it by diplomacy and negotiations, just like much else in the world. Much of the rest of what they're doing is what we call soft power. So the Belt and Road Initiative is soft power. Maybe we think it's wrong. But that's the kind of thing we approve of when we do it.

So I'm still asking, where's the threat? I don't like what happens in China. I think it's rotten. That's one of the most repressive governments anywhere. But I'm asking another question, we talk uniformly without exception about the Chinese threat, what are we talking about? In fact, just as a rule of thumb, if anything is discussed as if it's just obvious, we don't have to talk about it, everyone agrees, but we know it's complicated. In any such situation, we should be asking, what's going on? Nothing complicated can have that degree of uniformity about it. So some scam is underway.

EZRA KLEIN: How likely is it, in your view, that a nuclear bomb gets used in combat in the next decade?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, you can predict with confidence that it won't be used. Because if it is being used, nobody's going to be around to care about it. So nobody will show you that you are wrong. No, I'm exaggerating. That's a nuclear conflict between major nuclear powers. You could have, say, India, Pakistan could have a nuclear war, which would probably wipe out South Asia, but people would survive elsewhere. If there's a nuclear war between China and the United States or China and Russia, it's essentially saying everything is over. I mean, there will be survival, but nobody wants to live in a world of the kind that would survive.

Now let's take a look at U.S. strategy. Take a look at the strategic posture written by Jim Mattis, the sane person in the administration. When you read through the lines, it basically calls for preparing for a nuclear war against both China and Russia. In other words, it's saying, let's prepare ourselves for the total end of human society. I mean, is that even minimally sane?

Trump systematically eliminated step by step what was remaining of the arms control regime, was painstakingly put into place since Eisenhower actually, step by step, little steps, progress, and so on. Let's get rid of it one piece after another. The wrecking ball has to hit everything.

Biden got in just in time to be able to accept the Russian offers to maintain the New START agreement, not a great agreement, but at least it's something. Trump plainly wasn't going to sign it. Meanwhile, the United States and other countries, Russia and China, but primarily the United States has been developing new weapons of mass destruction and doing it in a way which is highly provocative.

So you go back to August 2019 when Trump dismantled the INF treaty, the Reagan-Gorbachev treaty, which was very effective in cutting back the war in Europe. Destroyed it. What did he do? Didn't just say we're dismantling the treaty. Immediately, within days, the United States carried out a test of a missile that violated the treaty. That's telling the Russians, hey, boys, let's go. Let's go and see if we can destroy each other.

I mean, this is the behavior of people who are insane. There is no way to fight a nuclear war with any adversary of any capacity. It's as simple and clear as that. The destruction would be so enormous that you wouldn't even want to live in that world. You can't even contemplate it. The fact that we're even talking about these things is mind boggling.

Now, in fact, there is a way out. There is an international treaty just was accepted by the U.N. General Assembly a couple of months ago, the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Prohibition, that means no manufacturing them, no storing them. Prohibition, get rid of them.

Well, none of the nuclear states joined the agreement, unfortunately. But if the U.S. wants to demonstrate this leadership role that American intellectuals like to talk about, OK, here's a way

to do it. Let's take the lead in making efforts to move towards accepting the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

I mean, I should say that's not an extreme position. It's been advocated by people like Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, late secretary of state under Reagan, Sam Nunn, people who've been right at the heart of the nuclear weapon system. They understand that you can't have a nuclear war. And we got to make moves towards eliminating.

There's another way to do it, a very significant way — establish nuclear weapons-free zones around the world. Doesn't end the problem, but it limits it. And it also indicates symbolically, which is not insignificant, indicates that we want to opt out of this. It's totally wrong. We don't want to be part of it.

EZRA KLEIN: That's an appropriately sobering place to end. What are three books you would recommend the audience read that influenced you?

NOAM CHOMSKY: If I look back over my own life, now there were a couple of books that had a major impact. One of them was Andre Schwarz-Bart's book in the late '50s on "The Last of the Just." Astonishing book, had a tremendous impact. Another that kind of book you read, and you walk around in a daze for a couple of days, was the autobiography of Nate Shaw. Forgotten the title. Former slave.

If I go back to early childhood, some of the reading that had a lasting impact, which I don't even think it's in English, was the Hebrew essays of a turn-of-the-century essayist that went by the name of Ahad Ha'am writing about partly intellectual contributions which were significant, partly talking about the developing situation in what was then Palestine, which had a large effect on my thinking ever since. And I could list plenty more.

EZRA KLEIN: Noam Chomsky, thank you very much.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah.

EZRA KLEIN: "The Ezra Klein Show" is a production of New York Times Opinion. It is produced by Rogé Karma and Jeff Geld, fact checked by Michelle Harris, original music by Isaac Jones, and mixing by Jeff Geld.

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