

The Opinion Pages

Noam Chomsky: On Trump and the State of the Union

George Yancy and Noam Chomsky

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Over the past few months, as the disturbing prospect of a Trump administration became a disturbing reality, I decided to reach out to Noam Chomsky, the philosopher whose writing, speaking and activism has for more than 50 years provided unparalleled insight and challenges to the American and global political systems. Our conversation, as it appears here, took place as a series of email exchanges over the past two months. Although Professor Chomsky was extremely busy, because of our past intellectual exchange, he graciously provided time for this interview.

Professor Chomsky is the author of numerous best-selling political works, translated into scores of languages. Among his most recent books are “Hegemony or Survival,” “Failed States,” “Hopes and Prospects,” “Masters of Mankind” and “Who Rules the World?” He has been institute professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology since 1976.

— George Yancy

George Yancy: Given our “post-truth” political moment and the growing authoritarianism we are witnessing under President Trump, what public role do you think professional philosophy might play in critically addressing this situation?

Noam Chomsky: We have to be a little cautious about not trying to kill a gnat with an atom bomb. The performances are so utterly absurd regarding the “post-truth” moment that the proper response might best be ridicule. For example, Stephen Colbert’s recent comment is apropos: When the Republican legislature of North Carolina responded to a scientific study predicting a threatening rise in sea level by barring state and local agencies from developing regulations or planning documents to address the problem, Colbert responded: “This is a brilliant solution. If your science gives you a result that you don’t like, pass a law saying the result is illegal. Problem solved.”

Quite generally, that’s how the Trump administration deals with a truly existential threat to survival of organized human life: ban regulations and even research and discussion of environmental threats and race to the precipice as quickly as possible (in the interests of short-term profit and power).

G.Y.: In this regard, I find Trumpism to be a bit suicidal.

N.C.: Of course, ridicule is not enough. It’s necessary to address the concerns and beliefs of those who are taken in by the fraud, or who don’t recognize the nature and significance of the issues for other reasons. If by philosophy we mean reasoned and thoughtful analysis, then it can address the moment, though not by confronting the “alternative facts” but by analyzing and clarifying what is at stake, whatever the issue is. Beyond that, what is needed is action: urgent and dedicated, in the many ways that are open to us.

G.Y.: When I was an undergraduate philosophy student at the University of Pittsburgh, where I was trained in the analytic tradition, it wasn’t clear to me what philosophy meant beyond the clarification of concepts. Yet I have held onto the Marxian position that philosophy can change the world. Any thoughts on the capacity of philosophy to change the world?

N.C.: I am not sure just what Marx had in mind when he wrote that “philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Did he mean that philosophy could change the world, or that philosophers should turn to the higher priority of changing the world? If the former, then he presumably meant philosophy in a broad sense of the term, including

analysis of the social order and ideas about why it should be changed, and how. In that broad sense, philosophy can play a role, indeed an essential role, in changing the world, and philosophers, including in the analytic tradition, have undertaken that effort, in their philosophical work as well as in their activist lives — Bertrand Russell, to mention a prominent example.

G.Y.: Yes. Russell was a philosopher and a public intellectual. In those terms, how do you describe yourself?

N.C.: I don't really think about it, frankly. I engage in the kinds of work and activities that seem important and challenging to me. Some of it falls within these categories, as usually understood.

G.Y.: There are times when the sheer magnitude of human suffering feels unbearable. As someone who speaks to so much suffering in the world, how do you bear witness to this and yet maintain the strength to go on?

N.C.: Witnessing it is enough to provide the motivation to go on. And nothing is more inspiring to see how poor and suffering people, living under conditions incomparably worse than we endure, continue quietly and unpretentiously with courageous and committed struggle for justice and dignity.

G.Y.: If you had to list two or three forms of political action that are necessary under the Trump regime, what would they be? I ask because our moment feels so incredibly hopeless and repressive.

N.C.: I don't think things are quite that bleak. Take the success of the Bernie Sanders campaign, the most remarkable feature of the 2016 election. It is, after all, not all that surprising that a billionaire showman with extensive media backing (including the liberal media, entranced by his antics and the advertising revenue it afforded) should win the nomination of the ultra-reactionary Republican Party.

The Sanders campaign, however, broke dramatically with over a century of U.S. political history. Extensive political science research, notably the work of Thomas Ferguson, has shown convincingly that elections are pretty much bought. For example, campaign spending alone is a remarkably good predictor of electoral

success, and support of corporate power and private wealth is a virtual prerequisite even for participation in the political arena.

The Sanders campaign showed that a candidate with mildly progressive (basically New Deal) programs could win the nomination, maybe the election, even without the backing of the major funders or any media support. There's good reason to suppose that Sanders would have won the nomination had it not been for shenanigans of the Obama-Clinton party managers. He is now the most popular political figure in the country by a large margin.

Activism spawned by the campaign is beginning to make inroads into electoral politics. Under Barack Obama, the Democratic Party pretty much collapsed at the crucial local and state levels, but it can be rebuilt and turned into a progressive force. That would mean reviving the New Deal legacy and moving well beyond, instead of abandoning, the working class and turning into Clintonite New Democrats, which more or less resemble what used to be called moderate Republicans, a category that has largely disappeared with the shift of both parties to the right during the neoliberal period.

Such prospects may not be out of reach, and efforts to attain them can be combined with direct activism right now, urgently needed, to counter the legislative and executive actions of the Republican administration, often concealed behind the bluster of the figure nominally in charge.

There are in fact many ways to combat the Trump project of creating a tiny America, isolated from the world, cowering in fear behind walls while pursuing the Paul Ryan-style domestic policies that represent the most savage wing of the Republican establishment.

G.Y.: What are the weightiest issues facing us?

N.C.: The most important issues to address are the truly existential threats we face: climate change and nuclear war. On the former, the Republican leadership, in splendid isolation from the world, is almost unanimously dedicated to destroying the chances for decent survival; strong words, but no exaggeration. There is a great deal that can be done at the local and state level to counter their malign project.

On nuclear war, actions in Syria and at the Russian border raise very serious threats of confrontation that might trigger war, an unthinkable prospect. Furthermore, Trump's pursuit of Obama's programs of modernization of the nuclear forces poses extraordinary dangers. As we have recently learned, the modernized U.S. nuclear force is seriously fraying the slender thread on which survival is suspended. The matter is discussed in detail in a critically important article in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in March, which should have been, and remained, front-page news. The authors, highly respected analysts, observe that the nuclear weapons modernization program has increased "the overall killing power of existing U.S. ballistic missile forces by a factor of roughly three — and it creates exactly what one would expect to see, if a nuclear-armed state were planning to have the capacity to fight and win a nuclear war by disarming enemies with a surprise first strike."

The significance is clear. It means that in a moment of crisis, of which there are all too many, Russian military planners may conclude that lacking a deterrent, the only hope of survival is a first strike — which means the end for all of us.

G.Y.: Frightening to the born.

N.C.: In these cases, citizen action can reverse highly dangerous programs. It can also press Washington to explore diplomatic options — which are available — instead of the near reflexive resort to force and coercion in other areas, including North Korea and Iran.

G.Y.: But what is it, Noam, as you continue to engage critically a broad range of injustices, that motivates this sense of social justice for you? Are there any religious motivations that frame your social justice work? If not, why not?

N.C.: No religious motivations, and for sound reasons. One can contrive a religious motivation for virtually any choice of action, from commitment to the highest ideals to support for the most horrendous atrocities. In the sacred texts, we can find uplifting calls for peace, justice and mercy, along with the most genocidal passages in the literary canon. Conscience is our guide, whatever trappings we might choose to clothe it in.

G.Y.: Returning to the point about bearing witness to so much suffering, what

do you recommend I share with many of my undergraduate students such that they develop the capacity to bear witness to forms of suffering that are worse than we endure? Many of my students are just concerned with graduating and often seem oblivious to world suffering.

N.C.: My suspicion is that those who seem oblivious to suffering, whether it is nearby or in remote corners, are for the most part unaware, perhaps blinded by doctrine and ideology. For them, the answer is to develop a critical attitude toward articles of faith, secular or religious; to encourage their capacity to question, to explore, to view the world from the standpoint of others. And direct exposure is never very far away, wherever we live — perhaps the homeless person huddling in the cold or asking for a few pennies for food, or all too many more.

G.Y.: I appreciate and second your point about exposure to the suffering of others not being far away. Returning to Trump, I take it that you view him as fundamentally unpredictable. I certainly do. Should we fear a nuclear exchange of any sort in our contemporary moment?

N.C.: I do, and I'm hardly the only person to have such fears. Perhaps the most prominent figure to express such concerns is William Perry, one of the leading contemporary nuclear strategists, with many years of experience at the highest level of war planning. He is reserved and cautious, not given to overstatement. He has come out of semiretirement to declare forcefully and repeatedly that he is terrified both at the extreme and mounting threats and by the failure to be concerned about them. In his words, "Today, the danger of some sort of a nuclear catastrophe is greater than it was during the Cold War, and most people are blissfully unaware of this danger."

In 1947, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists established its famous Doomsday Clock, estimating how far we are from midnight: termination. In 1947, the analysts set the clock at seven minutes to midnight. In 1953, they moved the hand to two minutes to midnight after the U.S. and U.S.S.R. exploded hydrogen bombs. Since then it has oscillated, never again reaching this danger point. In January, shortly after Trump's inauguration, the hand was moved to two and a half minutes to midnight, the closest to terminal disaster since 1953. By this time analysts were

considering not only the rising threat of nuclear war but also the firm dedication of the Republican organization to accelerate the race to environmental catastrophe.

Perry is right to be terrified. And so should we all be, not least because of the person with his finger on the button and his surreal associates.

G.Y.: Yet despite his unpredictability, Trump has a strong base. What makes for this kind of servile deference?

N.C.: I'm not sure that "servile deference" is the right phrase, for a number of reasons. For example, who is the base? Most are relatively affluent. Three-quarters had incomes above the median. About one-third had incomes of over \$100,000 a year, and thus were in the top 15 percent of personal income, in the top 6 percent of those with only a high school education. They are overwhelmingly white, mostly older, hence from historically more privileged sectors.

As Anthony DiMaggio reports in a careful study of the wealth of information now available, Trump voters tend to be typical Republicans, with "elitist, pro-corporate and reactionary social agendas," and "an affluent, privileged segment of the country in terms of their income, but one that is relatively less privileged than it was in the past, before the 2008 economic collapse," hence feeling some economic distress. Median income has dropped almost 10 percent since 2007. That's apart from the large evangelical segment and putting aside the factors of white supremacy — deeply rooted in the United States — racism and sexism.

For the majority of the base, Trump and the more savage wing of the Republican establishment are not far from their standard attitudes, though when we turn to specific policy preferences, more complex questions arise.

A segment of the Trump base comes from the industrial sector that has been cast aside for decades by both parties, often from rural areas where industry and stable jobs have collapsed. Many voted for Obama, believing his message of hope and change, but were quickly disillusioned and have turned in desperation to their bitter class enemy, clinging to the hope that somehow its formal leader will come to their rescue.

Another consideration is the current information system, if one can even use the phrase. For much of the base, the sources of information are Fox News, talk radio and other practitioners of alternative facts. Exposures of Trump's misdeeds and absurdities that arouse liberal opinion are easily interpreted as attacks by the corrupt elite on the defender of the little man, in fact his cynical enemy.

G.Y.: How does the lack of critical intelligence operate here, that is, the sort that philosopher John Dewey saw as essential for a democratic citizenry?

N.C.: We might ask other questions about critical intelligence. For liberal opinion, the political crime of the century, as it is sometimes called, is Russian interference in American elections. The effects of the crime are undetectable, unlike the massive effects of interference by corporate power and private wealth, not considered a crime but the normal workings of democracy. That's even putting aside the record of U.S. "interference" in foreign elections, Russia included; the word "interference" in quotes because it is so laughably inadequate, as anyone with the slightest familiarity with recent history must be aware.

G.Y.: That certainly speaks to our nation's contradictions.

N.C.: Is Russian hacking really more significant than what we have discussed — for example, the Republican campaign to destroy the conditions for organized social existence, in defiance of the entire world? Or to enhance the already dire threat of terminal nuclear war? Or even such real but lesser crimes such as the Republican initiative to deprive tens of millions of health care and to drive helpless people out of nursing homes in order to enrich their actual constituency of corporate power and wealth even further? Or to dismantle the limited regulatory system set up to mitigate the impact of the financial crisis that their favorites are likely to bring about once again? And on, and on.

It's easy to condemn those we place on the other side of some divide, but more important, commonly, to explore what we take to be nearby.

Correction: July 5, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of an organization that monitors nuclear weapons and disarmament. It is Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, not The

Bulletin of Atomic Scientists.

George Yancy, a professor of philosophy at Emory University, is the author of “Black Bodies, White Gazes” and “On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis,” and a co-editor of “Pursuing Trayvon Martin” and “Our Black Sons Matter.”

Now in print: “The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments,” an anthology of essays from The Times’s philosophy series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.

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