

Noam Chomsky on the State of Democracy & Human Rights

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Noam Chomsky: I've been asked to make some comments about democracy and human rights, with reference to the Asia/South Asia context. The revival of Asia in recent years is a remarkable phenomenon, has enormous significance for the future. And the word revival of course is appropriate because as we all know, as late as the 18th century China and India, not only had an unusually rich and vibrant political cultural history, but they were also the most advanced economies in the world. At the time, Europe was still a developing fringe. In fact it was borrowing more advanced technology from Asia in ways which are now barred as "piracy" – as the West adopts what economic historians call "kicking away the ladder". That is: first you climb up and then prevent others from following the same course.

There are some who project that, in the not too distant future, Asia may resume its dominant position in world affairs. However realistic these projections may be, the impact of colonisation and the torment of efforts to escape its legacy have left Asia with deep and even awesome problems, which are likely to be exacerbated in coming years as global warming proceeds in its calamitous course.

I would not presume to offer solutions to these problems – tasks that are beyond my competence – and would be out of place even if I had the depth of understanding that's required. Instead, in the hope that this may be enlightening, I would like to reflect about the state of democracy, human rights in the world, dominant societies of the present and recent past in Western civilization – with its record of great achievements and horrendous crimes, as Asia knows all too well.

So let's begin with the state of democracy in the West. Right now it's very seriously contested. In election after election, the centrist political parties that have governed in the post-World War II period have been weakened or have been virtually eliminated, along with the rise in what's been called illiberal democracy – democracy in form but very limited in function. As autocracy deepens the collapse of centrist institutions has been accompanied by a rise of the far right as a political force.

It's a matter of no slight concern, particularly in Central Europe, and in light of the terrifying recent history. Well, while these tendencies have been particularly striking in Europe, they do extend to the United States as well. The two traditional political parties still monopolize the political system, but they were severely shaken in the last 2016 elections.

Among Republicans in recent primaries, the candidates who emerged from the base were utterly unacceptable to the elites and were beaten back by the Republican establishment. 2016 was different. For the first time, the establishment candidates were crushed by an outsider who they regarded with fear and contempt, although he showed that – despite offensive antics – that he knew well how to serve the primary constituency of the party: private wealth and corporate power. That task was assigned to the Republican congressional leadership which has performed it admirably. Profits are skyrocketing while real wages continue to stagnate and restraints on avarice are eroding under rapid deregulation.

Less reported but more striking, was what happened to the Democrats. The electoral victory of a billionaire with huge financial and media support is not all that surprising, but the success of the Bernie Sanders campaign actually broke with over a century of US political history. He had virtually no support from private wealth or business power, he was either ignored or vilified in the media, but nevertheless came very close to winning the Democratic Party nomination. He was blocked at the end by machinations of party leaders. That's an astonishing departure from a record of over a century of elections that are mostly bought.

Political science research has demonstrated very persuasively that electability, both for President and Congress, is predictable with remarkable precision just from the single variable of campaign spending. And a corollary result is that the majority of the population are literally disenfranchised – in that their own representatives disregard their opinions and preferences – they listen to the voices of the donor class looking forward to the next election.

Both political parties were affected by the same powerful tendencies that are undermining the centrist institutions of European democracy. These developments have given rise to much commentary about the dangers of what is called populism, taken to be a serious threat to functioning democracy, and good order generally. And there have been many efforts by analysts to attribute the rise of such populism throughout the state capitalist world to various psychic disorders. One popular version attributes them to impulses and I'm quoting; "deep in our psyches and bodies beyond matters of fact: .. fear of the future, a sense of our own mortality".

However it's unnecessary to appeal to an epidemic of irrationality and emotional appeals that has mysteriously spread over the domains that have been subjected to the neoliberal policies of the past generation. These policies have been designed to sharply concentrate wealth, enhance corporate power, undermine democratic systems, which are reduced increasingly to formalities, while the majority of the population stagnates.

So in the United States for example, real wages for male workers today are actually lower than they were in 1979 when the neoliberal onslaught was just in its very early stages. In Europe, the attack on democracy is even stronger: major socio-economic decisions are made

by the unelected troika, northern banks looking over their shoulders. Throughout the Western world, the working people and the poor have been essentially cast aside. That quite naturally breeds anger, bitterness and resentment.

There are no mysteries here. No need to search deep into the psyche. The renowned economist Thomas Piketty and his colleagues have observed, I'll quote them, "an economy that fails to deliver growth for half of its people for an entire generation is bound to generate discontent with the status quo, and a rejection of establishment politics." So what's happening is no mystery.

It's also useful to remember that democracy has always been a highly contested concept. It's been feared and disdained among elites throughout the period of democratic revival in the world. That's been true, strikingly, in the great democratic revolutions. The first of these was in England, mid-17th century, leading finally to what's called the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which the rising bourgeoisie gain power through parliament at the expense of royal prerogatives. It had a wide variety of gains – one of the major ones was breaking the royal monopoly over the highly lucrative slave trade. The slave trade, the provider of course of the cheap cotton which is what fuelled the rural growth of manufacturing, finance, commerce. It led to wealth and power, particularly in England and delivery to the American colonies – the major slave state.

There were those who did not want to be ruled by either King or Parliament, probably the great mass of the population. Their pamphlets and spokespersons favored a universal education, guaranteed health care, democratization of the law, as one of their critics ominously observed, I'll quote him, they preached “seditious doctrine to the people” and aimed “to raise the rascal multitude ... against all men of best quality in the kingdom, to draw them(selves) into associations and combinations with one another ... against all lords, gentry, ministers, lawyers, rich and peaceable men” - Particularly frightening, were the itinerant workers and preachers calling for freedom and democracy, the printers putting out pamphlets questioning authority and its mysteries. The worst was when the rabble and their pamphlets proclaimed that they did not want to be ruled by either King or Parliament but rather by “countrymen like ourselves that know our wants”. Their pamphlets explained that - “It will never be a good world while knights and gentlemen make us laws that are chosen for fear and do but oppress us, and do not know the people's sores.”

These ideas naturally appalled the men of best quality, the rising bourgeoisie of merchants and manufacturers. They were willing to grant the people some rights but within limits. After the democrats had been defeated John Locke commented that "day-labourers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairymaids" must be told what to believe; "The greatest part cannot know and therefore they must believe."¹

Something similar took place in the second democratic revolution a century later in the liberated American colonies. Although it's important to remember that the American Revolution, with all its flaws, did advance popular democracy quite considerably. The concept “We the People”, which was a revolutionary idea at the time, however flawed it

might have been in implementation. During the 1780s, during the preparation of the US Constitution, there was a very impressive level of popular activism and debate. Pamphlets, press, meetings, groups, even rebellions, farmers protesting economic injustice.

The delegates at the Constitutional Convention were of course from the elite, and they were concerned to suppress the popular pressures for liberty and democracy. The major figures in framing the American Constitution were Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, and the basic concern of the Framers of the Constitution was captured lucidly by Hamilton. He explained that the Constitution is designed to be defense against “depredations which the democratic spirit is apt to make on property.” Property is the proper concern of government and Madison agreed. He argued at the Constitutional Convention that government must “protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.” He warned that, “if elections were open to all classes of people, the property of the landed proprietors would be insecure”. It was mainly an agricultural economy at the time. A land reform would be passed and that should not be acceptable.

Government should secure the permanent interests of the country which are property rights against innovation, meaning a threat to them. The landholders ought to have a share in the government to support these invaluable interests. The system should be constituted so as to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority. The Senate ought to be the body that ought to have permanency and stability. And the Senate, Madison explained, would be drawn from “the wealth of the nation,” the “more capable set of men”, people “who have sympathy for property and its rights”. And the Senate was to be the most powerful branch of the government – also insulated from the people and from democratic aspirations. The Senate was not to be popularly elected. In fact it was not popularly elected until 1913, but was assumed to be under elite control.

The whole story is a complex one but it's in general fair to say that the Framers did manage to carry out what amounts to an elite coup against the wishes of the general population. In fact the major scholarly study of the formation of the Constitution is appropriately called, *The Framers' Coup*: it details how the elite Framers carried out what the author called a conservative counter-revolution against too much democracy.

There have been constant popular struggles ever since to expand democracy, many victories, but also a regular elite backlash. No time to run through the interesting record, but the struggle is very much alive today. Popular struggles against the severe neoliberal assault against democracy and basic rights. The outcomes are sometimes unpleasant. Economic distress throughout history has opened the door to pathological symptoms that can be exploited by demagogues; racism, white supremacy, xenophobia. We see that today, strikingly, in the savage reaction in the Western democracies to the waves of miserable people fleeing violence, repression and grinding poverty.

Thousands of people are dying in the Mediterranean, fleeing Africa for a refuge in Europe, and Europe has a certain record in devastating the continent which I need not review. The same is happening in the United States, where the government has even descended to

separating children from their parents and families, and dispatching them to virtual concentration camps in the desert, in an effort to deter people who are still fleeing from the catastrophic effect of Ronald Reagan's terrorists wars in Central America. New waves are being engendered by the Obama-Clinton support for the military dictatorship that overthrew the reformist government of Honduras in 2009, leading to a sharp escalation and brutal violence. That's the main source of refugees today. The US-run drug war – which has had no effect whatsoever on use or flow of drugs – has subjected much of Latin America to terrifying violence. Those who flee are brutally rejected in gross violation of international law.

Pope Francis has described the refugee crisis as being, in fact, a moral crisis among the rich and privileged, and he's quite right.

And one can scarcely imagine the refugee crisis that the world will be facing in a few years, when rising sea levels drive huge numbers of people from the low lying planes of Bangladesh, or when water supplies in South Asia – which are already under severe stress – are further depleted by rising temperatures, melting the glaciers, also making much of the region virtually unliveable; and perhaps may even set two nuclear powers at each other's throats with consequences that are unthinkable.

It's all too easy to project disasters, but it should never be forgotten that there are solutions within reach. Solutions that would at least mitigate severe threats, might even pave the way to a world of much greater freedom and justice. Solutions are within reach, but to make use of the opportunities that exist will be no small test. And failure to do so is a prescription for severe catastrophe. Thank you.

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