



## **Noam Chomsky on the Coronavirus: “It's a colossal market failure”**

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**Srećko Horvat (SH):** Tired of dystopia. Welcome to another world after coronavirus. I am really happy and honoured for this special episode because there is a special guest joining us today. And that special guest is not only mine, but a hero of many generations. Both of us are unfortunately in self-isolation so this is also a very special occasion. But without further introduction, I think most of you who are watching this know who Noam Chomsky is, and I'm so glad that Noam is joining us today. Hello, Noam! Could you just tell us, where are you? Are you already in self-isolation and for how long?

**Noam Chomsky (NC):** Well, I'm in Tucson, Arizona. I'm in self isolation for the time being.

**SH:** You were born in 1928 and you wrote your first essay, as far as I know, when you were only 10 years old, which was an essay on the Spanish Civil War, actually, just after the fall of Barcelona. And that was 1938, which looks very far away for my generation. You survived the Second World War. Hiroshima. I mean, you were a witness to Hiroshima. You were a witness to many very big, important political historic events, from the Vietnam War, to the oil crisis, to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Before that, you were a witness to Chernobyl, after that in the 90s, you were a witness to a historical moment which was leading to 9/11, which was also a global event. And most recently, I mean, I'm trying to really shorten a long history and the lifetime of someone like you. But the most recent event was the financial crash of 2007 and 2008.

**SH:** So in this background of such a rich life and being a witness and also an actor in these major historical processes, how do you look at the current coronavirus crisis? Is it an unprecedented historic event? Is it something which surprised you, and how do you look at it? That would be my question.

**NC:** I should say that my earliest memories, which are haunting me now, are from the 1930s. The article that you mentioned on the fall of Barcelona was actually mainly about the apparently inexorable spread of the fascist plague all over Europe and where it was going to end. I much later discovered when internal documents came out that the analysts of the US government at the time and in the following years expected that the war would end, a new war was coming. That the war would end with the world divided into a U.S.-dominated region and a German-dominated region. So my childhood fears were not entirely out of place and those memories come back now.

I can recall when I was a child, a young child, listening to Hitler's Nuremberg rallies over the radio. I couldn't understand the words, but you could easily understand the mood and the threat, and so on. And I have to say, when I listen to Donald Trump's rallies today, it

resonates. It's not that he's a fascist. He doesn't have that much of an ideology. He is a sociopath, an individual concerned with himself, but the mood and the fear is similar. And the idea that the fate of the country and the world is in the hands of a sociopathic buffoon is shocking. The coronavirus is serious enough but it's worth recalling that there's a much greater horror approaching. We are racing to the edge of disaster, far worse than anything that's happened in human history. When Donald Trump and his minions are in the lead in racing to the abyss. In fact, there are two main threats that we're facing. One is the growing threat of nuclear war, which has exacerbated by tearing what's left of the arms control regime. And the other, of course, is the growing threat of global warming. Both threats can be dealt with but there isn't a lot of time.

And the coronavirus is a horrible plague and will have terrifying consequences, but there will be a recovery, while from the others there won't be recovery. It's finished. If we don't deal with them, we're done. And so the childhood memories are coming back to haunt me but from a different dimension. The threat of nuclear war; we can get a sense of where the world really is by looking to this January. As you know, every year the Doomsday Clock is set with the minute hand a certain distance from midnight, which means termination. Ever since Trump was elected, the minute hand has been moving closer and closer to midnight. Last year, it was two minutes to midnight – the highest, matching the highest it ever reached. This year the analysts dispensed with minutes, started moving to seconds – a hundred seconds to midnight. That's the closest that it's ever been. Citing three things: the threat of nuclear war, threat of global warming and the deterioration of democracy. Because that's the one (democracy) main hope that we have for overcoming the crisis. An informed, engaged, involved public taking control of their fate. If that doesn't happen. We're doomed.

If we are leaving our fate to sociopathic buffoons, we're finished. And that's coming close. If Trump is the worst that's because of US power, which is overwhelming. We can talk about U.S. decline but if you just look at the world, you don't see that. When the U.S. imposes sanctions – murderous, devastating sanctions – it's the only country that can do that. Everyone has to follow. Europe may not like, in fact hate, the sanctions on Iran, but they have to follow. They have to follow the master or else they will be kicked out of the international financial system. But that's not a law of nature. It's a decision in Europe to be subordinate to the master in Washington. Other countries don't even have the choice.

And back to the Coronavirus. One of the most shocking, harsh aspects of it is the use of sanctions to maximize the pain perfectly consciously. Iran has its own enormous internal problems but it is made worse by the stranglehold of tightening sanctions, which are consciously designed openly to make the suffering worse and they are suffering bitterly now. Cuba has been suffering from the sanctions from the moment that it gained independence. It's astonishing that they've survived, that they stay resilient. And one of the most ironic elements of today's coronavirus crisis is that Cuba is helping Europe. I mean, this is so shocking that you don't know how to describe it. That Germany can't help Greece but Cuba can help European countries. If you stop to think about what that means for our civilisation, words fail. Just as when you see thousands of people dying in the Mediterranean, fleeing violence that Europe has devastated for centuries and being sent to the deaths in the Mediterranean. You don't know what words to use. The civilizational crisis of the West at this point is devastating to think about and it does bring up childhood memories of listening to Hitler raving on the

radio to the raucous crowds at the Nuremberg rallies, you wonder, begin to wonder, is this species even viable.

**SH:** You mentioned the crisis of democracy. At this moment, I think we find ourselves also in a historically unprecedented situation, in the sense that almost 2 billion people – that's a figure I've found today – are in one or the other way confined at home. Whether it is isolation, self-isolation or currently almost 2 billion people in the world are at home – if they are lucky enough to have a home. At the same time, what we can witness is that Europe, but also other countries, closed their borders, not only internal ones, but outer borders as well. There is a state of exception in all the countries we can think of, which means curfew in many countries such as France, Serbia, Spain, Italy and other countries, with army on the streets.

And what I want to ask you, as a linguist, is about the language, which is now circulating. If you listen, not just to Donald Trump. If you listen to Macron, also some other European politicians, you will constantly hear that they speak about "war" and even the media speak about doctors who are on the first "frontlines" and the virus is called an "enemy", which reminded me, of course, also not to childhood memories, luckily, but a book which was written at that time, by Victor Klemperer called "Lingua Tertii Imperii", which is a book about the language of the Third Reich and in which way, through language, the ideology was imposed. So from your perspective, what does this discourse about war tell us and why do they present a virus as an enemy? Is it just to legitimize their new state of exception, or is there something deeper in this discourse?

**NC:** I think it's not exaggerated. It has some significance. The meaning is that if we want to deal with the crisis, we have to move to something like wartime mobilization. So if you take a rich country like the United States, it has the resources to overcome the immediate economic injustice. The mobilization for the Second World War that led the country into far greater debt than is contemplated today and it was a very successful operation, practically quadrupled the U.S. manufacturing, ended the depression, left the country with enormous debt but a capacity to grow. Now, that's the last thing we need. Probably not on that scale, it's not like this is a world war, but we need the mentality of a movement of a social scale to try to overcome the short run crisis, which is severe. How severe we don't know. We called the swine flu an epidemic in 2009, which originated in the US. It killed a couple of hundred thousand people at first. Society recovered. It has recovered from worse, but it has to be dealt with. That's a rich country like the United States. Of those "2 billion people" (citing Srečko's statistic), the majority are in India. What happens to poor Indians who are living hand to mouth? Who is isolated – starves to death! What's going to happen?

In a civilized world the rich countries would be giving assistance to those who are in need instead of strangling them, which is what we're (US) doing, particularly in India but in much of the world. Whether the crisis can be handled within a country like India, I don't know. Bear in mind with current tendencies if they persist, South Asia is going to be unliveable in a few decades. The temperature reached 50 degrees C in Rajasthan this summer and that's increasing. The water's running low and it could get even worse. There's two nuclear powers (Pakistan & India) there who are going to be fighting over restricted reduced water supplies. I mean, the coronavirus is very serious. We can't underestimate it but we have to remember that it's a fraction, a small fraction of major crises that are coming along. They may not disrupt

life to the extent that the coronavirus does today, but they will disrupt life to the point of making the species unsurvivable, not in the very distant future.

So we have many problems to deal with: immediate ones – coronavirus is serious and has to be dealt with – and much larger ones, vastly larger ones looming. And there is a civilizational crisis. We have to take time (to think) possibly of a good side to the coronavirus as it might bring people to think about what kind of a world do we want? Do we want the kind of a world that leads to this? Then we should think about the origins of this crisis. Why is there a coronavirus crisis?

It's a colossal market failure. It goes right back to the essence of markets, exacerbated by the savage neoliberal intensification of deep social economic problems. It was known for a long time that pandemics are very likely, and it was understood, very well understood, that there is likely to be a coronavirus pandemic, with slight modifications of the SARS epidemic – 15 years ago it was overcome. The viruses were identified, sequenced to the vaccines available. Labs around the world could be working right then on developing protection for potential coronavirus pandemics. Why didn't they do it? The market signals were wrong. The drug companies – we have handed over our fate to private tyrannies called corporations, which are unaccountable to the public. In this case, big pharma, and for them making new body creams is more profitable than finding a vaccine that will protect people from total destruction. It would have been possible for the government to step in.

Going back to wartime mobilization, that's what happened. Polio at the time – I can remember very well – was a terrifying threat. It was ended by the discovery of the Salk vaccine by a government institution set up by the Roosevelt administration. No patents and available to everyone. That could have been done this time, but the neoliberal plague has blocked that and we are living under an ideology for which economists have a good bit of responsibility, though it comes from the corporate sector. An ideology, which is typified by Ronald Reagan reading the script, handed to him by his corporate masters with his sunny smile saying, "Government is the problem, let's get rid of government", which means, let's hand over decisions to private tyrannies that are unaccountable to the public. On the other side of the Atlantic Thatcher was instructing us that, "there is no society, just individuals thrown into the market to survive somehow, and furthermore, there is no alternative." The world has been suffering under this for years, and it's now at the point where things that could be done, like direct government intervention on the scale of the invention of the Salk vaccine but that's blocked for ideological reasons coming out of the neoliberal plague.

The point is that this coronavirus pandemic could have been prevented. The information was there to present and act on. And in fact, it was well known in October 2019 just before the outbreak. There was a large-scale simulation in the United States and the world of a possible pandemic of this kind. Nothing was done. The crisis was then made worse by the (I don't know what word to use) treachery of the political systems, which didn't pay attention to the information that they were aware of. On December 31st (2019) China informed the World Health Organisation of pneumonia-like symptoms with unknown etiology. A week later, some Chinese scientists identified it as a coronavirus. Furthermore, they sequenced it and presented it to every nation of the world. By then, virologists and others who were bothering to read World Health Organisation reports knew about the coronavirus and they knew how to deal with it. Did they do anything? Well, yes, some did. The countries in the China sphere,

such as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, began to do something and they have pretty much it seems contained at least the first surge of the crisis.

In Europe to some extent it has happened. Germany, which hadn't moved to the "just in time" – that idiocy of hospital systems under neoliberalism – did have spare diagnostic capacity and was able to act in a highly selfish fashion not helping others, but for itself at least to have reasonable containment. Other countries just ignored it. The worst was the United Kingdom and the worst of all was the United States, which happens to be led by a sociopathic leader. Who says one day, "there's no crisis, it's just like the flu". The next day, "it's a terrible crisis and I knew it all along". The next day, "we have to go with the business because I have to win the election."

The idea that the world is in these hands is shocking. But the point is, that it started with a colossal market failure pointing to fundamental problems in the socio-economic order, made much worse by the neoliberal plague. And it continues because of the collapse of the kinds of institutional structures that could deal with it if they were functioning.

Well, these are topics we ought to be thinking about seriously and thinking in more depth about. As I said what kind of world do we want to live in? Will we overcome somehow? There will be options. The options range from the installation of highly authoritarian brutal states, all the way over to radical reconstruction in the society on more humane terms, concerned with human needs not private profits. And we should bear in mind that highly authoritarian vicious states are quite compatible with neoliberalism. In fact, the gurus of neoliberalism, from Ludwig von Mises to Friedrich Hayek to the rest, were perfectly happy with massive state violence as long as it supported what they called sound economics. Neoliberalism has its origins in 1920s Vienna. In fact, Mises could barely contain his delight in the proto-fascist Austrian state which smashed the labour unions and Austrian social democracy, and joined the early proto-fascist government. He praised fascism in fact because it was protecting sound economics. When Pinochet installed a murderous brutal dictatorship in Chile, they loved it. They all flocked there. Milton Friedman offered to help out with this marvellous miracle, bringing sound economics of bringing great profits to foreign investors and a small part of the population. So it's not outlandish to think that savage neoliberal systems might be reinstalled by self-proclaimed "libertarians" with powerful state violence being imposed.

That's one possible nightmare that might come about, but it's not necessary. There is the possibility that people will organise, become engaged, as many are doing, and bring about a much better world, which will also confront the enormous problems that we're facing right down the road: the problems of nuclear war, which is closer than it's ever been, and the problems of environmental catastrophes from which there is no recovery. Once we've gotten to that stage it's over. And that's not far in the distance unless we act decisively.

So it's a critical moment of human history, not just because of the coronavirus, but also it should bring us to awareness of the profound flaws – I cannot emphasize it strong enough – the deep dysfunctional characteristics of the whole socioeconomic system, which has to radically change if there's going to be a survivable future. So this could be a warning sign and a lesson to deal with it today in order to prevent it from exploding, but thinking of its

roots and how those roots are going to lead to more crises, worse ones than this would mean extra pain right away.

**SH:** And since we don't have much time, I'll just pose one last question. So I think many people are interested, and also us who are active in social movements and mobilizations and have organised for decades using physical and social closeness between people. But now suddenly we are all getting accustomed to what is now being called "social distancing". So my question is, how do you see the future of social resistance in the times of social distance? And if this takes a few more months, not to mention maybe a year or two, and we are mainly in self-isolation or at home, what would be your advice to progressives around the world? Activists, also intellectuals, students, workers, on how to organise in this new situation? And could you perhaps tell us whether you see a hope that, instead of going into global authoritarianism, this open historic situation might result in a radical transformation of the world, which would be a dream of equality, just and full of solidarity?

**NC:** Well, first of all, we should bear in mind that in the past few years there has been a form of social isolation, which is very damaging. You go into a McDonald's and take a look at a bunch of teenagers sitting around a table having a hamburger. What you see is two conversations going on. One sort of shallow discussion among them. Another, the one that each one is having on his cell phone with some remote individual – who we call friend. And this has atomized and isolated people to an extraordinary extent. The Thatcher principle, "there is no society", has escalated the misuse of social media that has turned people into very isolated creatures, especially young people. There are actually universities now in the United States where the sidewalk will have plaques on them saying "look up" because every kid who's walking around is glued to his cell phone. That's a form of self-induced social isolation, which is very odd.

We're now in a situation of real social isolation. It has to be overcome by re-creating social bonds in whatever way it can be done. In need of whatever kind that can be helping people in need, contacting them, developing organizations, expanding organisation, getting them to be functional and operative. Making plans for the future. Bringing people together as you can do in the Internet age. To join, to consult, to deliberate, to figure out answers to the problems that they face, and work on them. Which can be done. It's not face-to-face communication, which for human beings is essential, but to be deprived of it for a while, we can put it on hold, find other ways and continue with, and in fact extend and deepen, the activities carried out. Can be done. It's not going to be easy but humans have faced worse problems.

**SH:** Can I pose a question, since we're both in self-isolation?

**NC:** My dog is trying to have a conversation (laugh).

**SH:** What was that before, a parrot? Do you have a bird as well, or a parrot or a bird? There was the sound of a bird!

**NC:** A parrot. Yes, a bilingual parrot. It can say "sovereignty to all the people" in Portuguese.

**SH:** Fascinating!

**NC:** It says better wisdom than we hear from (the people) in Washington!

**SH:** Thanks a lot Noam. I think this is a beautiful ending to this conversation. I hope we will talk soon. We will all stay at home and we will wait for you and your parrot to tell us when to get out of our apartments and make a revolution.

**NC:** I will check with her (parrot)! (laughs) You know, one of the positive things that people can do right now is to use the occasion of the Coronavirus to watch DiEM25TV to be up to date on what's happening, and more importantly, what we can all do.

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