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JULY 2021

Chomsky: Republicans Willing to Destroy De- mocracy to Retake Power



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#FreeBritney and all Saudi Women too

By Medea Benjamin & Ariel Gold

One week after Britney Spears sent shockwaves across the world by relaying the conditions she has lived under for the past 13 years, a

Los Angeles judge has denied her request to have her father removed from her conservatorship. Despite testifying that under her father's care, she has not been allowed to marry, or make medical, professional, legal, or financial decisions for herself, the courts have yet to grant Britney the freedom she is asking for.

The legal grounds for Britney's situation came about in 2007 when her life was

quickly spiraling out of control because of mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse. After locking herself in a bathroom with her sons, she was placed under a 72-hour involuntary psychiatric hold.

In January 2008, shortly after Britney's 26th birthday, an LA judge issued an emergency order giving Britney's father Jamie Spears temporary conservatorship over his daughter. Nine months later,

Photo by Ringo Chiu/Shutterstock





the judge made the conservatorship permanent.

“My dad and anyone involved in this conservatorship, including my management,” should be in jail,” Britney told the courtroom on Wednesday, June 23rd as she described how her father was not permitting her to have an IUD birth control device removed from her body.

If any woman can relate to Britney’s struggle to free herself from her father’s rule, it is Saudi women’s rights activist Samar Badawi.

Samar Badawi is a leading advocate for women in Saudi Arabia to gain their fundamental rights and abolish the country’s male guardianship system (a conservatorship that restricts the rights of all Saudi women). In 2008, after Samar escaped her father’s abuse by running off to a women’s shelter, her father charged her with disobedience under the country’s male guardianship system. After Samar missed some court dates, a warrant was issued for her arrest.

Like Britney, Samar appealed to the courts to have her father removed from being her male guardian/conservator. Since her father had refused to allow her to marry her boyfriend, she accused her father of violating Islamic law by forcibly keeping her single. But, when she appeared for the trial in July

2010, she was taken into custody for the warrant against her.

Human rights activists and organizations worldwide campaigned for Samar, and on October 25, 2010, Governor Khalid bin Faisal ordered her release. An uncle on her father’s side was appointed her new male guardian.

But Samar continued to fight for women’s rights, and in July 2018, she was arrested as part of a crackdown by Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) against women who had successfully campaigned for Saudi women to have the right to drive. Samar remained in prison until she was finally released on July 27, 2021 after serving her sentence.

While for Britney, it is her father who has control over her life, in Saudi Arabia, the ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is, de facto, the ultimate conservator of all Saudi women.

Just as Britney’s father has tried to portray himself as simply a fiercely loving, dedicated, and loyal father who rescued his daughter, so Saudi Arabia has been engaging in a public relations campaign to brand itself as a modernizing nation in the pursuit of women’s rights. To this end, on August 1, 2019, Saudi Arabia announced that

it would abolish part of its male guardianship system. However, in Saudi Arabia, women still:

- need a male guardian;
- need their male guardian’s permission to marry;
- need to present justification to a male judge in order to be granted a divorce (men are permitted to divorce without justification or a court hearing);
- can be charged in court with disobedience to their male guardian or husband;
- can be imprisoned in detention facilities for disobedience. Once there, women must obtain the permission of their male guardian, husband, or sponsor to be released;
- face enormous discrimination regarding child custody and laws regarding unwed mothers. In court cases, a woman’s testimony is worth only half that of a man’s; women can lose custody for such conditions as not dressing modestly enough, for working full-time, or getting remarried;
- face abuse and violence, while men who abuse or even kill wom-



en face little to no legal repercussions.

Britney's case isn't over yet and new court rulings are expected in the coming weeks and months. Her advocates say that now, more than ever, it is critical to keep campaigning for Britney's freedom. "This is so much bigger than just Britney," said #FreeBritney activist Junior Olivas to *Time Magazine*, referring to the fact that there are about 1.5 million adults in the U.S.—mostly seniors and people with disabilities—under some form of conservatorship or guardianship. A look at Saudi Arabia's restrictions on women shows that Britney's case should also be looked at through an international lens. As we work to free Britney, we should also work to free Samar Badawi and all Saudi women. **Z**

Medea Benjamin is cofounder of CODEPINK for Peace, and author of several books, including *Kingdom of the Unjust: Behind the US-Saudi Connection*. Ariel Gold is the national co-director of CODEPINK and runs the organization's Middle East Program.

Making Juneteenth a holiday was the easy part—but will real justice follow?

By Sonali Kolhatkar

After the United States Senate and House in quick succession passed a federal bill to make "Juneteenth" a federal holiday to commemorate the end of slavery, President Joe Biden wasted no time in signing the bill into law. "Making Juneteenth a federal holiday is a major step forward to recognize the wrongs of the past," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, expressing what has come to be his party's standard performative gesturing toward historic racial injustices by a party that likes to set itself apart from Republicans via lip service to liberal ideals.

To his credit, Schumer added, "But we must continue to work to ensure equal jus-

tice and fulfill the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation and our Constitution." Ensuring "equal justice" is precisely the step that would carry real meaning and add teeth to the very short, one-page Juneteenth bill. So why is that critical aspect missing from the bill?

There are many historical accounts of how Juneteenth came about, but the most widely accepted one is that enslaved Black people in Texas were the last in the U.S. to know that they had the legal right to be free—two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. The revelation that freedom was at hand came from General Gordon Granger in Galveston on June 19, 1865, and if ever there was a declaration of American independence that carried any moral weight, it is the day that came to be known as Juneteenth—rather than the Fourth of July and the syrupy and blind patriotism that accompanies it.

When a wave of mass protests against racist police brutality swept the United States last summer after George Floyd's killing, corporate America began to acknowledge Juneteenth as an important day, "discovering" what many Black communities had commemorated for years. Then-President Donald

Trump also took credit for publicizing it, saying with his usual audacious ignorance, “I did something good: I made Juneteenth very famous. It’s actually an important event, an important time. But nobody had ever heard of it.” Since most white Americans had likely not heard of Juneteenth, in the 45th president’s mind, that meant nobody had. Trump made the comments in the context of a controversial political rally that his re-election campaign scheduled for June 19, 2020, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the historical site of some of the nation’s bloodiest racial violence.

A year later, Democrats, with their newfound political power, are trying to set themselves apart from Trump and the GOP. Rather than making aggressive efforts to pass a hefty infrastructure bill, a minimum wage increase, or important voting rights reform—all of which would more substantially benefit Black Americans—the party is now expecting credit for recognizing Juneteenth as a federal holiday that all Americans can mark.

Congressperson Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) who sponsored the Juneteenth holiday legislation went as far saying, “what I see here today is racial divide crumbling, being crushed this day under a momentous vote that brings

together people who understand the value of freedom.” These words are as hollow as the declarations of a “post-racial” era when Barack Obama was elected to the presidency in 2008.

What Democrats are utterly failing to acknowledge is that when enslaved people were declared free, that freedom meant an abrupt end to the horrific injustices wreaked upon generations of Black Americans, but it also meant almost no accountability or justice to compensate for what was done to them, no payment for the centuries of stolen labor, no redress for the violence, terror, family separations, sexual assaults, grinding servitude, and other hard-to-imagine harms.

For Democrats to make a symbolic gesture toward racial justice without the financial redress that could actualize such justice is mere posturing. Melina Abdullah, a leader in the Los Angeles chapter of Black Lives Matter and a professor in Pan-African studies at California State University of Los Angeles, made a statement that cuts to the heart of what lawmakers need to hear, saying about Juneteenth, “White folks need to sit this one out. It’s not yours. Your acknowledgment should come in the form of #reparations.” She added, “And by ‘white folks’

I mean government, corporations, and the individual white families whose wealth is built on the stolen labor of Black folks.” Her sentiments were widely echoed by other Black Americans on social media.

Neither party appears to have the political courage to truly respect the idea of racial justice for Black Americans. Democrats, who take great pride in the symbolism of their history-making half Black, half Indian Vice President Kamala Harris, are also going out of their way to censure and silence Somali American Congressperson Ilhan Omar (D-MN) for speaking uncomfortable truths. The liberal party excels in performance over substance and in celebrating Black Americans as long as they help meet diversity quotas but remain subservient to the establishment.

In contrast, Republicans have brushed aside all pretense toward respecting racial equality altogether. The rabidly racist Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI) almost objected to the Juneteenth bill, saying, “it still seems strange that having taxpayers provide federal employees paid time off is now required to celebrate the end of slavery.” (One wonders what the senator would deem acceptable instead.) And in Texas, where





Photo by International Mayo/Shutterstock

the original Juneteenth celebrations began and where the day was declared a state holiday earlier this year, Gov. Greg Abbott signed a bill championed by Texas Republicans to bar the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in

state schools. It is precisely the academic framework of CRT that has helped to create a broad understanding of why Juneteenth is important, and it is also what can help make the case for why reparations must be central to racial jus-

tice.

Republicans and conservatives have fought hard to ensure that injustices arising from slavery remain in the past and that there must be no accounting for it in the present day. (These are often

the same people who righteously insist on preserving Confederate-era statues for the sake of history.) If only it were true that racial injustices ended when slavery ended. But American society has remained hostile to Black com-

munities through persistent, ongoing, debilitating racial discrimination and injustices even today. There has been no serious federal acknowledgment in the form of accountability and compensation either of historic injustices or

present-day discrimination. Neither Democrats nor Republicans are bold enough to embark on a project of reparations, and instead the two major parties remain emotionally invested in the myth of American exceptionalism.



Marking Juneteenth as a federal holiday is only the first step toward financial redress, not the last. The small town of Asheville, North Carolina, last year launched a program targeting Black residents for housing and business opportunities without actually dispensing what matters—money. The city of Evanston, Illinois, earlier this year went a bit further and began issuing \$25,000 housing grants to Black residents to compensate for systematic housing discrimination along racial lines. Amherst, Massachusetts, is exploring pathways to reparations, and even states like California are considering steps for financial restitution.

Such efforts indicate that the countless Black academics, leaders, journalists and activists who have painstakingly made the case for reparations for decades might be seeing some vindication. Now if only federal lawmakers like Schumer, Ed Markey (D-MA), and Lee would use their political clout to move beyond performative gestures, we might believe they truly care about righting historical injustices in the service of full equality.

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This article was produced by Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Sonali Kolhatkar is the founder, host and executive producer of “Rising Up With Sonali,” a television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. She is a writing fellow for the Economy for All project at the Independent Media Institute.

Supreme Suppression

By Tom H. Hastings

The Trump/McConnell-packed Supreme Court has begun to live up to the fondest hopes of fascist Republicans. They ruled that the voter suppression law passed in Arizona is just fine.

Thus continues the unraveling of U.S. democracy as the third branch of government, contaminated by Republican dirty tricks, confirms the trend of voter suppression laws designed to prevent entire groups of people who tend to vote Democrat from actually being able to vote.

First, justice Scalia dies early in 2016 and McConnell blocks any Obama nomina-

tion, stalling almost a year until Trump gets in, then ramming Gorsuch onto the court, followed by controversial Kavanaugh, then last-minute Coney-Barrett, altering the balance of the court irretrievably for decades.

At some point, the people will either get involved or watch glassy-eyed as white nationalist rightwing “conservatives” destroy democracy in the name of “patriotism.” Happy 4th.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement put a great deal of pressure on the federal government to pass laws that outlawed such discriminatory voter suppression. They did so with non-violent methods, winning the sympathy, and ultimately the strong support, of the majority of Americans.

I vividly recall being a boy in Minnesota, learning about all this as it happened, and my friends all felt the same, that racism was really ignorant, and that the African American students who were sitting at lunch counters and riding on buses and trying to register to vote were Americans just like us. Their brothers were dying in Vietnam, just like ours. And all the violence was on one side, the KKK and local Southern law enforcement brutally attacking peaceful, nonviolent kids.

As a result of this campaigning we saw first the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and then the Voting Rights Act of 1965, passed with the approval of the American people.

But now the Republicans in 48 states have introduced 389 bills designed to restrict voting, and 28 so far have passed into law with many more in progress.

In many cases the Democrats and Republicans alike deserve opposition for their policies that lead to foreign wars, lack of environmental protection, and failure to curb the Military Industrial Complex, first referred to by Republican Eisenhower in his 17 January 1961 Farewell Address.

In this case, however, Republicans alone are conspiring to end democracy and institute pre-1965 blatant voter suppression, the sorts of maneuvers that have resulted in the U.S. losing global ranking as a leader of democracy, sliding down in the listings until we are now referred to as a “flawed democracy.”

Indeed, we are now ranked less free than Croatia, Slovakia, Mongolia, Argentina, or Grenada.

Congratulations, Republicans. You’ve driven democracy into the ditch.

Happy “Independence” Day.

Back in the day, nonviolent

people power was the only answer to governmental inertia in radically improving U.S. democracy. That is still the case. Either we get involved or we see our country fall further away from the highest standards of democracy, now seen in places like Uruguay, Sweden, Ireland, Finland, Canada, Norway, and other places that protect the democratic rights of all their people.

Happy 4th.

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Dr. Tom H. Hastings is Coördinator of Conflict Resolution BA/BS degree programs and certificates at Portland State University, PeaceVoice Senior Editor, and on occasion an expert witness for the defense of civil resisters in court.

Politically Correct Racism

By Robert C. Koehler

“The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie.”

I offer these words of Nikole Hannah-Jones, whose 2019 essay is part of the *New York Times Magazine*’s “1619

Project,” to the Heritage Foundation and the horde of Republican politicians currently trying to update the look and feel of American racism (a.k.a., “the lie”), to make it, you know, respectable and politically correct, so that it fits seamlessly into the mores of the 21st century.

To do so, they’ve taken aim at an academic concept dating back to the 1970s, known as “critical race theory,” which essentially makes the point that racism isn’t merely a phenomenon of individual beliefs but something, my God, built into the social structure—which is absurd, so they say, in a country that is long past its racial troubles and is now colorblind.

As the Heritage Foundation puts it, critical race theory is “an ongoing effort to reimagine the United States as a nation riven by groups, each with specific claims on victimization.”

Can you imagine?

“Democrats want to teach our children to hate each other,” Rep. Lauren Boebert of Colorado, a member of the Republican House Freedom Caucus, declared recently.

And Rep. Ralph Norman of South Carolina, speaking at the same press conference, put it bluntly: “Folks, we’re in a cultural warfare today. Critical race theory asserts that people with white skin



are inherently racist, not because of their actions, words or what they actually believe in their heart—but by virtue of the color of their skin.”

In other words, to talk about race and American history, especially to bring it into the present moment and suggest there is still such a thing as “white privilege,” is itself racist: a means of sowing divisions between people that otherwise wouldn’t exist.

As *Education Week* points out: “The topic has exploded in the public arena this spring—especially in K-12, where numerous state legislatures are debating bills seeking to ban its use in the classroom.”

Indeed, legislation “purporting to outlaw” the teaching of critical race theory has passed in Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma and Tennessee. However: “The bills are so vaguely written that it’s unclear what they will affirmatively cover.”

The result of this vague legislation may simply be to discourage any deeply penetrating look at American history in the nation’s classrooms—kind of the way American history has always been taught. Keep the focus on the ideal, as per the words of Thomas Jefferson: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their

Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

And keep it away from the lie: that Jefferson owned some 600 slaves, and that, indeed, one-fifth of the newly formed country were slaves.

“Enslaved people,” writes Hannah-Jones, “were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently. . . .

“Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised ‘Negroes for Sale.’”

Yeah, this is pretty awkward. How could this be taught in a public-school setting? The Republican solution is to shrug and gently set all that aside and at the same time, by focusing on a specific, newly proclaimed evil—critical race theory—rally its constituents against the true enemy (the Democrats, the “left”) and keep them eager to vote. In so doing, they are also making sure real American racism remains alive and

evolving.

For instance, as NPR pointed out, during the Freedom Caucus press conference mentioned above, nearly half of the speakers, even as they denied that racism was in any way part of the nation’s social structure, “invoked Martin Luther King Jr., expressing their desire to be judged ‘by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.’”

So a major component of the latest manifestation of racism is that white people are its victims. This is an interesting trajectory. We’ve moved from outright slavery, which was ended by the Civil War; to the era of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan (whites-only drinking fountains, the lynching of black people, and so much more), which was ended by the civil rights movement; to racism’s present incarnation, which includes the prison-industrial complex, the maintenance of police departments that function as occupying armies in black neighborhoods, ongoing financial inequality, voter suppression, and the unaddressed effects of three centuries of racist cruelty and subhuman treatment, which Republicans are now attempting to hold together by means of political correctness.

All of which leads me back to the ideal and the lie. The paradox of this reality—that



this was a nation founded on the best and worst of who we are—goes well beyond such questions as: How do we teach history to 10-year-olds? At the very least, it asks the question: How do we teach American history to the entire country?

Tom Hanks, for instance, in a recent op-ed piece in the

New York Times, expresses deep consternation over how much American history has remained invisible, such as the Tulsa Race Massacre of May 1921—a riot of white people running amok in a prosperous black community, which resulted in 300 people killed and some 10,000 left homeless, as 40 square blocks

were destroyed.

But beyond our awareness of history lies an even deeper matter, or perhaps two matters at once: How do we heal our past wounds, as they manifest in the present day; and also, how do we truly face, and transcend, our founding racism, which remains—no doubt in many

unknown ways—embedded in today’s social and political structure and continues to influence who we are and what we do?

Robert Koehler (koehlercw@gmail.com), syndicated by PeaceVoice, is a Chicago award-winning journalist and editor. He is the author of *Courage Grows Strong at the Wound*.

and Neoliberal Rule

By Nicolas J. S. Davies

A People’s Vaccine Against a Mutating Virus

A recent Yahoo News/YouGov poll found that wor-

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Nicole Glass
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ries about the COVID pandemic in the United States are at their lowest level since it began. Only half of Americans are either “very worried” (15%) or “somewhat worried” (35%) about the virus, while the other half are “not very worried” (30%) or “not worried at all” (20%).

But the news from around the world makes it clear that this pandemic is far from over, and a story from Vietnam highlights the nature of the danger.

Vietnam is a COVID success story, with one of the lowest rates of infection and death in the world. Vietnam’s excellent community-based public health system prevented the virus from spreading beyond isolated cases and localized outbreaks, without a nationwide lockdown. With a population of 98 million people, Vietnam has had only 8,883 cases and 53 deaths.

However, more than half of Vietnam’s cases and deaths have come in the last two months, and three-quarters of the new cases have been infected with a new “hybrid” variant that combines the two mutations detected separately in the Alpha (UK) and Delta (India) variants.

Vietnam is a canary in the pandemic coal-mine. The way this new variant has spread so quickly in a country that has defeated every previous form

of the virus suggests that this one is much more infectious.

This variant must surely also be spreading in other countries, where it will be harder to detect among thousands of daily cases, and will therefore be widespread by the time public health officials and governments respond to it. There may also be other highly infectious new variants spreading undetected among the millions of cases in Latin America and other parts of the world.

A new study in *The Lancet* medical journal has found that the Alpha (UK), Beta (South Africa) and Delta (India) variants are all more resistant to existing vaccines than the original COVID virus, and the Delta variant is still spreading in countries with aggressive vaccination programs, including the U.K.

The Delta variant accounts for a two-month high in new cases in the UK and a new wave of infections in Portugal, just as developed countries ease restrictions before the summer vacation season, almost certainly opening the door to the next wave. The UK, which has a slightly higher vaccination rate than the United States, had planned a further relaxation of restrictions on June 21st, but that is now in question.

China, Vietnam, New Zealand and other countries de-

feated the pandemic in its early stages by prioritizing public health over business interests. The United States and Western Europe instead tried to strike a balance between public health and their neoliberal economic systems, breeding a monster that has now killed millions of people. The World Health Organization believes that six to eight million people have died, about twice as many as have been counted in official figures.

Now the WHO is recommending that wealthier countries who have good supplies of vaccines postpone vaccinating healthy young people, and instead prioritize sending vaccines to poorer countries where the virus is running wild.

President Biden has announced that the United States is releasing 25 million doses from its stockpiles, most of which will be distributed through the WHO’s Covax program, with another 55 million to follow by the end of June. But this is a tiny fraction of what is needed.

Biden has also agreed to waive patent rights on vaccines under the WTO’s TRIPS rules (the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights), but that has so far been held up at the WTO by Canada and right-wing governments



in the U.K., Germany, Brazil, Australia, Japan and Colombia. People have taken to the streets in many countries to insist that a WTO TRIPS Council meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday, June 8-9, must agree to waive patent monopolies.

Since all the countries blocking the TRIPS waiver are U.S. allies, this will be a critical test of the Biden administration's promised international leadership and diplomacy, which has so far taken a back seat to dangerous saber-rattling against China and Russia, foot-dragging on the JCPOA with Iran and war-crime-fueling weapons-peddling to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Ending international vaccine apartheid is not just a matter of altruism, or even justice. It is a question of whether we will end this pandemic before vaccine-resistant, super-spreading and deadlier variants fuel even more toxic new waves. The only way humanity can win this struggle is to act collectively in our common interest.

Public Citizen has researched what it would take to vaccinate the world, and concluded that it would cost only \$25 billion—3% of the annual U.S. budget for weapons and war—to set up manufacturing plants and distribution hubs across the world

and vaccinate all of humanity within a year. Forty-two Progressives in Congress have signed a letter to President Biden to urge him to fund such a plan.

If the world can agree to make and distribute a People's Vaccine, it could be the silver lining in this dark cloud, because this ability to act globally and collectively in the public interest is precisely what we need to solve so many of the most serious problems facing humanity.

For example, the UN Environment Program (UNEP) is warning that we are in the midst of a triple crisis of climate change, mass extinction and pollution. Our neoliberal political and economic system has not just failed to solve these problems. It actively works to undermine efforts to do so, granting people, corporations and countries who profit from destroying the natural world the freedom to do so without constraint.

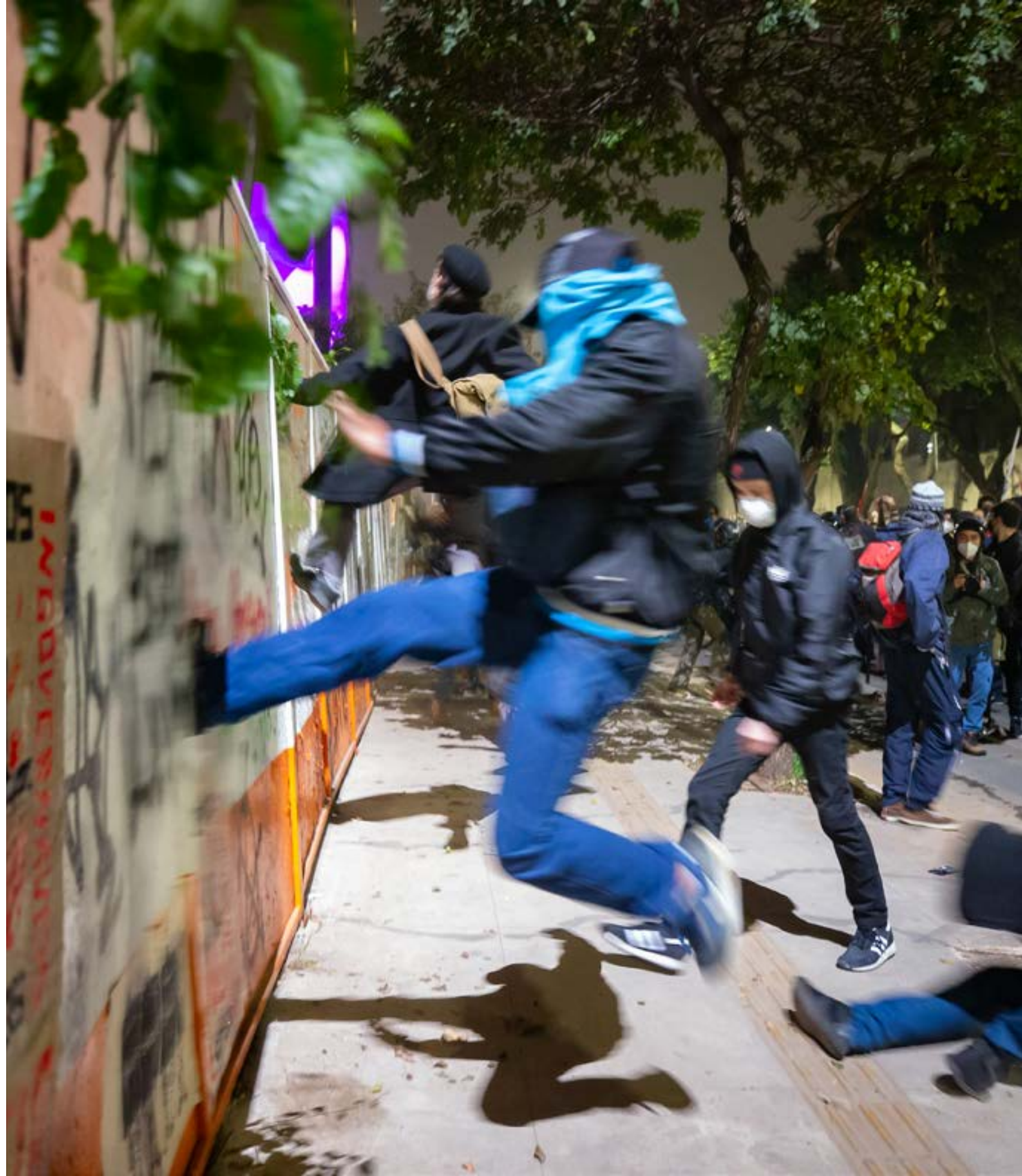
That is the very meaning of laissez-faire, to let the wealthy and powerful do whatever they want, regardless of the consequences for the rest of us, or even for life on Earth. As the economist John Maynard Keynes reputedly said in the 1930s, "Laissez-faire capitalism is the absurd idea that the worst people, for the worst reasons, will do what is best for us all."

Neoliberalism is the reimposition of 19th century laissez-faire capitalism, with all its injustices, inequality and oppression, on the people of the 21st century, prioritizing markets, profits and wealth over the common welfare of humanity and the natural world our lives depend on.

Berkeley and Princeton political theorist Sheldon Wolin called the U.S. political system, which facilitates this neoliberal economic order, "inverted totalitarianism." Like classical totalitarianism, it concentrates ever more wealth and power in the hands of a small ruling class, but instead of abolishing parliaments, elections and the superficial trappings of representative government as classical totalitarianism did, it simply co-opts them as tools of plutocracy, which has proved to be a more marketable and sustainable strategy.

But now that neoliberalism has wreaked its chaos for a generation, popular movements are rising up across the world to demand systemic change and to build new systems of politics and economics that can actually solve the huge problems that neoliberalism has produced.

In response to the 2019 uprising in Chile, its rulers were forced to agree to an election for a constitutional assembly, to draft a constitution to re-



**Free World**

By Ted Glick

When the planning began, four or so months ago, for what became a 9-day, 175 mile, 2021 Walk For Our Grandchildren that ended on June 28, the pandemic was still strong. It was weakening, as the Biden Administration from day one made its defeat its top priority, but up until a month or so ago the first thing we talked about on our weekly planning calls was the pandemic and if we should keep moving forward, or adjust our planning.

Biden and his administration deserve credit for their leadership on this huge issue. But when it comes to the existential issue of the deepening climate emergency, it's a different story. And that is why from June 20 to June 28, from Scranton, Pa. to Wilmington, De., from Biden's birthplace to his current home, a core group of about 20 people—most, but not all, grandparents—walked, rode, met with local activists, rallied, picketed, demonstrated and, on the last day in downtown Wilmington, in front of a major Chase Bank corporate headquarters, blocked a major intersection by sitting

place the one written during the Pinochet dictatorship, one of the vanguards of neoliberalism. That election has now taken place, and the ruling party of President Pinera and other traditional parties won less than a third of the seats. So the constitution will instead be written by a super-majority of citizens committed to radical reform and social, economic and political justice.

In Iraq, which was also swept by a popular uprising in 2019, a new government seated in 2020 has launched an investigation to recover \$150 billion in Iraqi oil revenues stolen and smuggled out of the country by the corrupt officials of previous governments.

U.S.-backed former exiles flew into Iraq on the heels of the U.S. invasion in 2003 “with empty pockets to fill,” as a Baghdad taxi driver told a Western reporter at the time. While U.S. forces and U.S.-trained Iraqi death squads destroyed their country, they hunkered down in the Green Zone in Baghdad and controlled and looted Iraq's oil revenues for the next seventeen years. Now maybe Iraq can recover the stolen money its people so desperately need, and start using its oil wealth to rebuild that shattered country.

In Bolivia, also in 2019, a

U.S.-backed coup overthrew its popular indigenous president, Evo Morales. But the people of Bolivia rose up in a general strike to demand a new election, Morales' MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) Party was restored to power, and Luis Arce, Morales' former Economy Minister, is now Bolivia's President.

Around the world, we are witnessing what can happen when people rise up and act collectively for the common good. That is how we will solve the serious problems we face, from the COVID pandemic to the climate crisis to the terminal danger of nuclear war. Humanity's survival into the twenty-second century and all our hopes for a bright future depend on building new political and economic systems that will simply and genuinely “do what is best for us all.”

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Nicolas J. S. Davies is an independent journalist, a researcher for CODEPINK and the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*.

Walking and Rocking for a Fossil Fuel

Z MAGAZINE PAGE 23



DON'T
DISAPPOINT
DAVID



When the **LAST TREE**,
the **LAST FISH** is eaten,
and the **LAST STREAM** poisoned
YOU WILL REALISE
THAT YOU
CANNOT EAT MONEY
~Alani Munsawin~

LOVE OUR MOTHER
LIKE YOU
LOVE 
YOURS!!!



Our
On the
FIRE

THIS ISN'T
A MOMENT
THIS IS A
MOVEMENT



in 10 rocking chairs, leading to 15 arrests.

Two hundred or more people took part in one or more of the eighteen different events over these nine days. Seventy organizations supported it, many of them front-line groups fighting fracking and proposed new fossil fuel infrastructure. A highlight of the press coverage we received was in Scranton, where good stories were aired by three local TV stations, and two consecutive days of coverage was given to us by the major local daily newspaper. Two TV networks came to our Independence Hall rally in Philadelphia. A daily Wilmington area paper carried a good story on the civil disobedience action in front of Chase.

All along the way we passed out half-page leaflets which explained why we were walking: “We stand with local people whose air, water and land are being poisoned by oil and gas pollution and whose health is suffering. We demand that Chase Bank stop its massive funding of fossil fuel companies. We call for keeping fossil fuels in the ground to prevent the escalation of destructive weather events for the sake of future generations and all life on earth. The current proposals by the Biden administration to address the

climate emergency and many environmental injustices are inadequate. We need a rapid, uncompromising transition away from the extraction and burning of toxic fossil fuels while embracing renewable energy, especially solar and wind power.”

On a daily basis, we were gratified by the support given to us and expressed by people we encountered as we were walking, or who gave us floor space to sleep in their church or temple or lawn space on their property to camp. Local organizers all along the route responded to our plan to undertake this walk and worked with us to organize successful local actions and gatherings. The wonderful people from Seeds of Peace kept us well fed with their traveling food service operation.

There were challenges all throughout these nine days: high heat and humidity for about half of them; a strong rainstorm that came through Scranton on the second night and forced us to alter our plans for the next day as we dealt with lots of wet tents, clothes and continuing rain for most of the third day; rain on day seven as we walked along the 291 Industrial Highway to Chester and Marcus Hook, Pa.; and just staying on a very packed schedule of walking, actions, public gatherings, walker gatherings and deal-

ing with the logistics of the trip.

We got through all of this because we had to, because there was a shared and openly expressed feeling about how urgent the issues are that we were addressing. That feeling built as we met and talked with local people along the way dealing with the negative impacts of a toxic, extractive, fossil fuel economy, a corporate-dominated economy, which puts profits for a tiny few above the health and wellness of the many. On this walk, we saw, smelled, learned about and were moved, over and over again, by those realities.

Without a doubt, the walk deepened our personal commitments to do all that we can both right now, when Biden and Congress need strong pressure to do the right thing legislatively, and for years to come to change this unjust, unequal, corrupt and polluting system.

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Ted Glick is a volunteer organizer with Beyond Extreme Energy and author of *Burglar for Peace: Lessons Learned in the Catholic Left's Resistance to the Vietnam War*, published last year. Past writings and other information can be found at <https://tedglick.com>, and he can be followed on Twitter at <https://jtglick.com>.



Republicans Are Willing to Destroy Democracy to Retake Power

Noam Chomsky interviewed by C.J. Polychroniou

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CJ. Polychroniou: Over the course of the past few decades, the Republican Party has gone through a series of ideological transformations—from traditional conservatism to reactionism and finally to what we may define as “proto-fascism” where the irrational has become the driving force. How do we explain what has happened to the GOP?

Noam Chomsky: Your term “neoliberal proto-fascism” seems to me quite an accurate characterization of the current Republican organization—I’m hesitant to call them a “Party” because that might suggest that they have some interest in participating honestly in normal parliamentary politics. More fitting, I think, is the judgment of American Enterprise Institute political analysts Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein that the modern Republican Party has transformed to a “radical insurgency” with disdain for democratic participation. That was before the Trump-McConnell hammer blows of the past few years, which drove the conclusion home more forcefully.

The term “neoliberal proto-fascism” captures well both the features of the current party and the distinction from the fascism of the past. The commitment to the most brutal form of neoliberalism is apparent in the legislative record, crucially the subordination of the party to private capital, the inverse of classic fascism. But the fascist symptoms are there, including extreme racism, violence, worship of

the leader (sent by God, according to former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo), immersion in a world of “alternative facts” and a frenzy of irrationality. Also in other ways, such as the extraordinary efforts in Republican-run states to suppress teaching in schools that doesn’t conform to their white supremacist doctrines. Legislation is being enacted to ban instruction in “critical race theory,” the new demon, replacing Communism and Islamic terror as the plague of the modern age. “Critical race theory” is the scare-phrase used for the study of the systematic structural and cultural factors in the hideous 400-year history of slavery and enduring racist repression. Proper indoctrination in schools and universities must ban this heresy. What actually happened for 400 years and is very much alive today must be presented to students as a deviation from the real America, pure and innocent, much as in well-run totalitarian states.

What’s missing from “proto-fascism” is the ideology: state control of the social order, including the business classes, and party control of the state with the maximal leader in charge. That could change. German industry and finance at first thought they could use the Nazis as their instrument in beating down labor and the left while remaining in charge. They learned otherwise. The current split between the more traditional corporate leadership and the Trump-led party is suggestive of something similar, but only remotely. We are far from the conditions that led to Mussolini, Hitler, and their cohorts.

On the driving force of irrationality, the facts are inescapable and should be of deep concern. Though we can’t credit Trump entirely with the achievement, he certainly has shown great skill in carrying out a challenging assignment: implementing policies for the benefit of his primary constituency of great wealth and corporate power while conning the victims into worshipping him as their savior.

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In the background are more realistic concerns about the disappearance of “the traditional American way of life”: a Christian and white supremacist world where Black people “know their place” and there are no infections from “deviants” who call for gay rights and other such obscenities

That’s no mean achievement, and inducing an atmosphere of utter irrationality has been a primary instrument, a virtual prerequisite.

We should distinguish the voting base, now pretty much owned by Trump, from the political echelon (Congress)—and distinguish both from a more shadowy elite that really runs the Party, McConnell and associates.

Attitudes among the voting base are truly ominous. Put aside the fact that a large majority of Trump voters believe that the elections were stolen. A majority also believe that “The traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it” and 40 percent take a stronger stand: “if elected leaders will not protect America, the people must do it themselves, even if it requires violent actions.” Not surprising, perhaps, when a quarter of Republicans are reported to believe that “the government, media, and financial worlds in the US are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.”

In the background are more realistic concerns about the disappearance of “the traditional American way of life”: a Christian and white supremacist world where Black people “know their place” and there are no infections from “deviants” who call for gay rights and other such obscenities. That traditional way of life indeed is disappearing.

There are also elements of realism in the various “great replacement” theories that seem to consume much of the Trump base. Putting aside absurdities about immigration and elite plotting, a simple look at distribution of births suffices to show that white domination is declining.

It’s also worth remembering the deep roots of these concerns. Among the founders, there were two distinguished figures of the Enlightenment, one of whom hoped that the new country would be free of “blot or mixture,”

red or black (Jefferson), while the other felt that Germans and Swedes should perhaps be barred entry because they are too “swarthy” (Franklin). Myths of Anglo-Saxon origin were prevalent through the 19th century. All of this is apart from the virulent racism and its horrifying manifestations.

Concerns about satanic cults are dangerous enough, but other deeply irrational beliefs are far more consequential. One of the most threatening revelations of recent days was a scarcely noticed observation in the latest report of a Yale University group that monitors attitudes on climate change—the euphemism for the heating of the planet that will end organized human life on earth unless soon brought under control. The report found that “Over the past year, there has been a sharp decline in the percentages of both liberal/moderate Republicans and conservative Republicans who think developing sources of clean energy should be a priority for the president and Congress. The current numbers are all-time lows since we first asked the question in 2010.”

Meanwhile every day’s news provides information about new potential disasters—for example, the June 11 release of studies reporting the accelerated collapse of a huge Antarctic glacier that might raise sea levels by a foot and a half—along with reminders by the scientists reporting the warning that “The future is still open to change—if people do what is needed to change it.”

They won’t, as long as the reported attitudes prevail. Unless overcome, they might be a kiss of death if the current strategy of the Republican Party succeeds in putting the wreckers back in power. The strategy is plain enough: no matter what the harm to the country, and to their own voting base, ensure that the Biden administration can do nothing to remedy severe domestic problems, and ram through Jim Crow-style legislation to block voting of people of color and the poor, counting on the

acquiescence of the reactionary judiciary that McConnell-Trump have succeeded in installing.

The party is not a lost cause. The Democrats have helped by failing to provide a constructive alternative that answers to the needs and just aspirations of many of those who have flocked to the Trump banner. That can change. Furthermore, attitudes are shifting among younger Republicans, even among younger Evangelicals, a core part of the Republican base since the 1970s.

Nothing is irremediable.

With regard to the political echelon, there is little to say. With fringe exceptions, they have abandoned any semblance of integrity. Current votes are a clear indication: Total Republican opposition to measures that they know are favored by their constituents in order to ensure that the Biden administration can achieve nothing.

The most abject capitulation of the political echelon was on global warming. In 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain had a limited climate plank in his program, and congressional Republicans were considering related legislation. The Koch energy conglomerate responded in force, and any spark of independence was extinguished. That much was evident in the last Republican primaries in 2016, pre-Trump: 100 percent denial that what is happening is happening, or worse, saying maybe it is but we're going to race toward disaster without apologizing (as said John Kasich, who was honored for his integrity by being invited to speak at the 2020 Democratic convention).

I can't raise any objections whatsoever to what you say, but I am a bit baffled by Biden's insistence in trying to reach out to Republicans on some of the major issues confronting the country. Isn't bipartisanship a pipe dream?

Not entirely. Democratic majority leader Chuck Schumer did manage a triumph of bipartisanship. Abandoning a prior commitment to legislation on global warming, Schumer teamed up with Republican Todd Young to conceal a limited industrial policy program within a "hate China" bill that appealed to shared jingoist sentiments. Republicans ensured that such significant components as funding for the National Science Foundation would be whittled down. Young celebrated the triumph by declaring that "when future generations of Americans cast their gaze towards new frontiers," they won't see "a red flag planted" there, but our own red, white, and blue. What better reason could there be to try to revive domestic manufacturing while trying to undermine the Chinese economy—at a moment when cooperation is a prerequisite for survival.

Meanwhile Biden's Department of Defense is reorienting resources and planning to war with China, a form of madness barely receiving attention, analyzed in detail in Issue #1 of the Committee for a Sane U.S.-China Policy, June 11, 2021.

Trump has transformed the Republican Party into a cult of personality. Is this why Republican leaders blocked the creation of a commission to investigate the January 6 attack on Capitol?

Trump has captured the voting base, but the political echelon faces a quandary. For a long time, the party elite has been a rich man's club, pandering to business power even more than the Democrats, even after the Democrats abandoned the working class in the 1970s, becoming a party of Wall St. and affluent professionals. The business world was willing to tolerate Trump's antics as long as he was loyally serving them—with some distaste, since he tarnished the image they project of "soulful

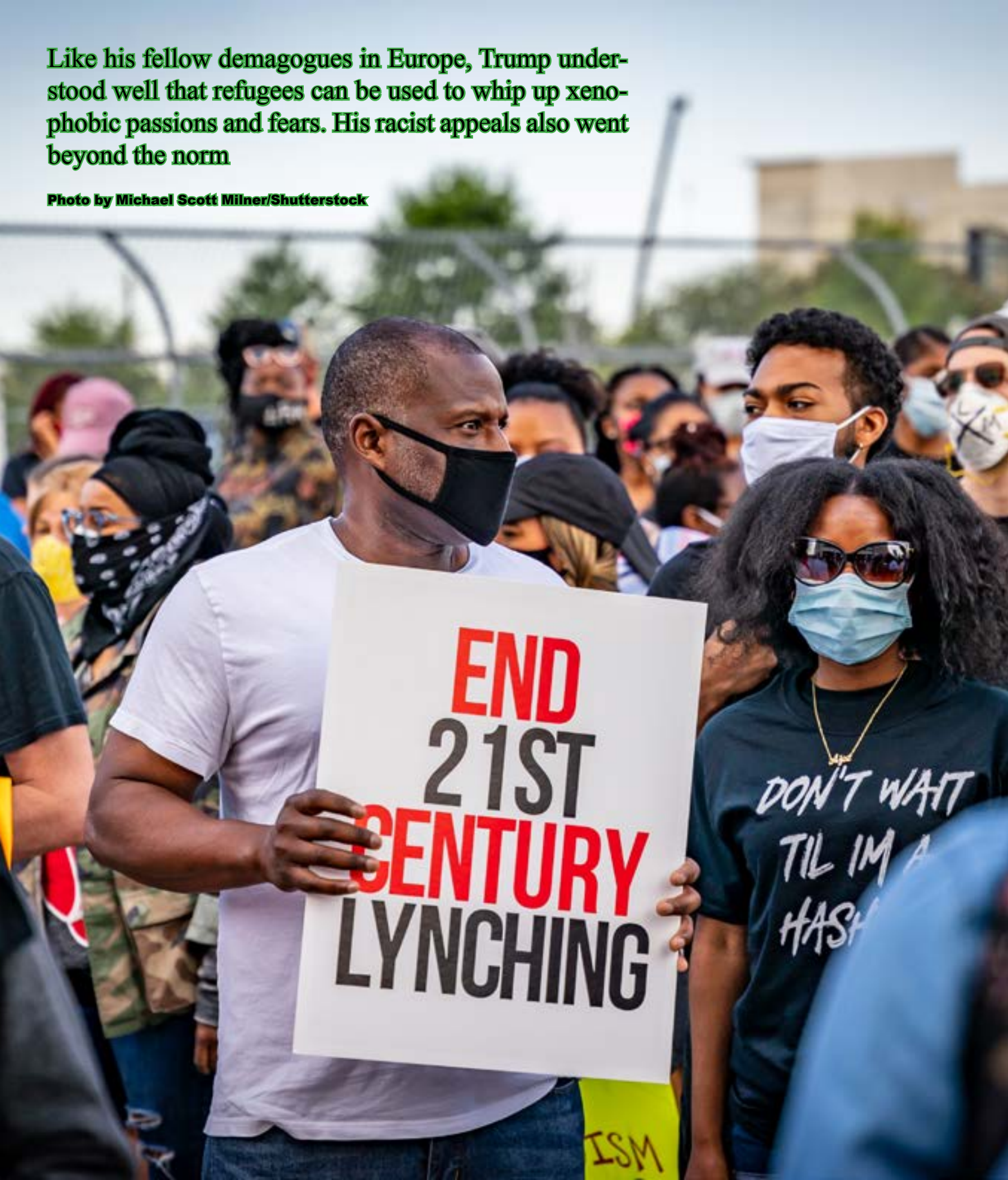


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Photo by Holli/Shutterstock

Like his fellow demagogues in Europe, Trump understood well that refugees can be used to whip up xenophobic passions and fears. His racist appeals also went beyond the norm

Photo by Michael Scott Milner/Shutterstock



corporations.” But for major sectors, January 6 was too much.

The McConnell types who run the party are caught between a raging voting base in thrall to Trump and the masters of the economy whom they serve. A commission of inquiry, if at all honest, would have deepened this rift, which they have to find a way to paper over if the party, such as it is, is to survive. Best then to cancel it.

Lies, propaganda, and restricting voting rights have become the governing principles of today’s GOP. To what extent will the new voting restrictions work to the advantage of the Republican Party, and how will they impact on the current political climate in general and the future of whatever is left of democracy in the United States in particular?

Trump’s highly effective strategy of legitimizing “alternative facts” was based on an endless flood of lies, but a few true statements floated in the debris. One was his comment that Republicans can never win a fair election. That’s a real problem for the rich man’s club. It’s hard to garner votes with the slogan “I want to rob you. Vote for me.” That leaves only a few options. One is to prevent the “wrong people” from voting. Another is to shape the party program so that policy is concealed by appeals to “cultural issues.” Both have been actively pursued. Trump gave the practices a particularly vulgar twist in his usual style, but he didn’t invent them.

The current wave of Republican Jim Crow-style legislation is understandable: Trump’s observation is accurate, and is likely to be more so in the future with demographic changes and the tendency of younger voters to favor social justice and human rights, among Republicans as well. The efforts have become more feasible after the Roberts Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in the Shelby decision

in 2013, which “set the stage for a new era of white hegemony,” as Vann Newkirk rightly observed.

Displacement of policy by “cultural issues” traces back to Nixon’s southern strategy. With Democrats beginning to support mild civil rights legislation, Nixon and his advisers recognized that they could switch the southern vote to Republican by racist appeals, barely disguised.

Under Reagan there was little disguise; racist rhetoric and practices came naturally to him. Meanwhile the Republican Christian nationalist strategist Paul Weyrich easily convinced the political leadership that by abandoning their former “pro-choice” stands and pretending to oppose abortion, they could pick up the northern Catholic and newly politicized Evangelical vote. Gun-loving was soon added to the mix, by now reaching such weird absurdities as the recent Benitez decision overturning California’s ban on assault rifles, which are, after all, hardly different from Swiss army knives [according to Benitez]. Trump added more to the mix. Like his fellow demagogues in Europe, he understood well that refugees can be used to whip up xenophobic passions and fears. His racist appeals also went beyond the norm.

Trump has exhibited a certain genius in tapping poisons that run not far below the surface of American society and culture. By such means, he managed to capture the Republican voting base. The party leadership is dedicated to the obstructionist strategy of sacrificing the interests of the country in order to regain power. That leaves the country with one functioning political party, itself torn between the neoliberal leadership and a younger social democratic voting base.

Your phrase “whatever is left of American democracy” is to the point. However progressive it might have been in the 18th century—and there is much to say about that—

by today’s standards American democracy is deeply flawed in ways that were already becoming clear to the leading Framer, James Madison by 1791, when he wrote to Jefferson deploring “the daring depravity of the times,” as the “stockjobbers will become the pretorian band of the government—at once its tools and its tyrant; bribed by its largesses, and overawing it by clamors and combinations.”

That could well be a description of recent years, particularly as the neoliberal assault achieved its entirely predictable consequence of placing government even more at the command of concentrations of private power than before. The “largesses” are too familiar to review. Ample research in mainstream political science has shown that the “clamors and combinations” have left the majority of voters unrepresented, as their own representatives heed the voices of the super-rich, wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists.

The most recent study, using sophisticated AI techniques, dispels “notions that anyone’s opinion about public policy outside of the top 10 percent of affluent Americans independently helps to explain policy.” Thomas Ferguson, the leading academic scholar of the power of the “tools and tyrants” of government, concludes: “Knowing the policy area, the preferences of the top 10 percent, and the views of a handful of interest groups suffice to explain policy changes with impressive accuracy.”

But some vestiges of democracy remain, even after the neoliberal assault. Probably not for long if neoliberal “proto-fascism” extends its sway.

But the fate of democracy won’t actually matter much if the “proto-fascists” regain power. The environment that sustains life cannot long endure the wreckers of the Trump era of decline. Little else will matter if irreversible tipping points are passed.

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The Publication of Origin for this article is *Truthout*.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout’s Public Intellectual Project. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*, an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at Truthout and collected by Haymarket Books; *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change*, an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at Truthout and collected by Haymarket Books (scheduled for publication in June 2021).



India's Covid Catastrophe, Part 1

Jayati Ghosh interviewed by David Barsamian



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tem under which humanity will not survive.

BARSAMIAN: In an article in Dollars & Sense, you write, "The Covid-19 pandemic is bringing home the fact that neoliberalism is posing a massive danger to public health, and therefore to the very survival of societies." Explain the basic characteristics of neoliberal economics. And why is it called neoliberal?

The news from India is grim. A Covid wave is sweeping the country, inflicting widespread misery and deaths. Government figures of Covid-related fatalities are widely seen as very much underreported. India may soon pass the U.S. as the global leader in deaths. Analysts say that the country wasn't prepared to handle the surge. Hospitals have been overwhelmed and there are acute shortages of oxygen, medicine and vaccines. The country is ruled by Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the BJP. It is a Hindu nationalist party. It has come under wide criticism for its handling of the crisis. Noted writer Arundhati Roy says, "It is hard to convey the full depth and range of the trauma, chaos and indignity that India's Covid catastrophe has inflicted. Meanwhile, Modi and his allies tell people not to complain."

Jayati Ghosh is a renowned economist and award-winning author. Her articles appear in major newspapers, journals and magazines. She taught at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi for almost 35 years. She now teaches at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

BARSAMIAN: What has the pandemic revealed to you in terms of the global capitalist political and economic system?

GHOSH: We knew that capitalism was already a very unequal and unjust system. But I think the severity with which it has struck, especially the developing world now, and the extent to which it has exposed the flaws and has revealed how unequal and how unjust and also how unsustainable it is. It is really a sys-

GHOSH: Neoliberalism is supposed to be an extension of earlier liberal economics, which basically argued that markets should be allowed to function on their own without too much regulation. And states should kind of get out of the way. Neoliberalism is an extreme version of that which really emerges as a major significant force in economic policy-making from about the 1980s onwards. But it's a mistake to think that it actually asks for states to withdraw. It's not about the withdrawal of the state. It's rather about using the power of the state to promote the interests of big capital.

And so what we've seen in the face of neoliberal globalization is that it's really a massive increase in state support to, and protection of large capital in finance, in various other industries, vis-a-vis workers, vis-a-vis citizens, vis-a-vis ordinary people everywhere. And what they do is that they will promote free markets when it suits large capital, so that they can destroy small capital or destroy workers by making them compete against one another. Or they will promote concentrated markets and monopolies when it suits them. Like the case of intellectual property rights and patents.

BARSAMIAN: India's independence in 1947 is followed by a period of what might be called liberal socialist economic programs. But in the early 1990s, it embraces neoliberalism. How has the country fared under this economic doctrine?

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GHOSH: In India, we already had some major development failures, even before the neoliberal phase. We had a failure in terms of adequate food and nutrition for most of our population. In terms of a basic structural transformation, we were not able to move people out of low productivity activities in agriculture and services. In terms of inadequate education and human development indicators. So we did have some development failures. And those should have been corrected by a different strategy of reform than the one that was adopted.

What we got from the 1990s onwards was the notion that the way to achieve growth and development was to promote large capital in the belief that it would then trickle down to the rest of the population. Therefore, the idea was to subsidize, to provide incentives of different kinds to large capital in various ways and to improve their bargaining power. What happened is that we did get some growth, no doubt about it. The 2000s in particular was a decade of faster growth than before. But a lot of it was based really on what you could call the extractive industries, minerals and other things. And an appropriation of small capital rather than genuine investments in technology and in productivity increases. We did not get the required improvements in the living conditions of people. So even in that period of high growth we didn't really get an improvement in the conditions of the bottom half of the population. Our nutrition indicators didn't improve. Our basic health indicators didn't improve. And we still have some of the worst human development indicators in the world for many of these.

BARSAMIAN: The mantra that was often intoned, "a rising tide will lift all boats" didn't quite work.

GHOSH: We know that a rising tide hasn't lifted all boats anywhere in the world. To do that you need proactive public intervention, which has to again come from demands from below that governments cannot refuse. I would say India is a very stark example of that, where existing inequalities have been accentuated and deeply sharpened by economic processes that have further reduced the bargaining power of workers and peasants.

BARSAMIAN: You might also say that about the United States, arguably the world's richest country but is experiencing the greatest number of COVID-19 deaths. It seems like a contradiction.

GHOSH: Yes, at one level, it should be. I think India will soon overtake the U.S. in terms of the number of Covid deaths. Yet the fact that the U.S. suffered so terribly is a real indictment of its particular economic strategy. It shows that it has consistently undermined public health. We have countries like Vietnam that have fared so much better or Cuba. Much, much poorer countries operating under many more difficult constraints that have fared so much better, because of a better, more vibrant public health system that is accessible to all. The United States chose a terribly expensive and incompetent and inefficient system of health provision that has favored private profiteering over public health. And it has suffered because of that.

Pandemics are ultimately public health concerns, which by the way, are going to become more and more frequent. We cannot even pretend that this was a one-off and once we're over this hump, we're safe. We see that lack of reliance or investment in a public health system has deep consequences not just for inequality and the conditions of people, but also for social resilience and even economic resilience.





Waiting for food packets

Photo by PradeepGaurs/Shutterstock

BARSAMIAN: Writer, author and social critic Arundhati Roy on the state of India's hospitals and clinics, says, "The system has not collapsed, the system barely existed." What kind of services are available to the average Indian, particularly in rural areas where something like 70%, the bulk of the population, live.

GHOSH: First of all, I want to remind everyone in the United States that India is a country of sub-continental dimensions. Its population is bigger than that of the European Union. It is more diverse than the European Union in terms of languages and cultures. It has states. And people in different states fare very differently depending on what kinds of governments and resources they have. So to think of India as one whole, and to think of the average Indian is very misleading. There are some states like Uttar Pradesh in the north, which have about the same population as the United States. Uttar Pradesh at the moment is a disaster zone. It is a complete mess. It has always had a poor public health system. It is now run by a government that is openly and aggressively trying to underplay and pretend that none of this is happening. And, instead of investing its resources in trying to save people from this incredible spread of disease and disaster, is going after anyone who points out that people are dying, is going after those who go on to social media saying I need help, please get me oxygen, it is trying to arrest such people. It is threatening hospitals that are saying we need oxygen, please have it delivered to us immediately.

So it's doing exactly the opposite of what needs to be done. In addition to the crime of encouraging huge super spreader events, like a major Hindu religious festival that was brought forward by a full year and brought 4 million people on the banks of the river Gan-

ges. It was a massive super spreader event. After doing all that, it is then attacking those who are pointing out that people are dying. We now have this spectacle of thousands of bodies floating down the river or just abandoned on the banks, by people who are too poor to even pay for cremations. It is a disaster of unbelievable proportions. We don't even know the full extent of it, because this disease has now spread to rural areas. There are barely any medical facilities to track, not just the disease, but even the deaths. It's an appalling situation.

By contrast, there are other states, for example, in the south, Kerala for sure, but even Tamil Nadu, where the health systems are much better. Where, yes, the disease is spreading but the proportion of deaths is much lower where there are attempts to contain this. Where the state government is actively trying to administer support to those who are deprived of livelihoods and those who are bereft. And so it's a very different situation, I would not say that it's the same that there is an average situation in India.

Certainly, in large parts of the country it's an absolute disaster. And this has to do very much with the policies and complacency of the Central Government, which is currently missing in action, having created much of the problem. There is now documented evidence that its medical advisors were telling it from February and March, that there are real dangers of the new variants spreading from Maharashtra and other states, and that we have to be careful. They ignored all of these. They suppressed these. They encouraged super spreader events. The Prime Minister went to big election rallies and celebrated the fact that there were hundreds of thousands of people attending these rallies. They did everything they could to actually encourage the spread of the disease, attending big public events without masking, without social distancing of

any kind, without any protection, and leading people to believe that everything was solved. Bragging about how India had solved the problem, when in fact we were just lucky in the first wave. There was nothing that the government did. It was really luck that allowed the first wave to come down without serious deaths. India was almost taunting other countries saying that we have done so well in this that we are exporting vaccines, without doing the basic arithmetic of considering your population. How many vaccines you will need? What kind of production you have planned for? Whether you have allowed other companies to produce it within the country, so that we will have enough vaccines for our own population. So the degrees of incompetence and mismanagement are matched only by what we now see as complete callousness and even cruelty towards the people who are suffering as a result.

BARSAMIAN: The images are heartbreaking. Both you and I know of people who have passed away or are suffering from COVID-19. You mentioned the Hindu festival, Kumbh Mela. Apparently it was advanced a year on the advice of an astrologer. Is that right?

GHOSH: That's right. Unbelievable, but true. On top of everything else we have a government that openly devalues science. So these astrologers could not predict the pandemic. But apparently, they can predict that it'll be good for the government to have this Kumbh Mela held this year. Now, in normal conditions, you would have actually postponed a major event like this. You could have postponed it by a year, even if it were meant to be held this year, instead of which you bring it forward by a full year. Because you're so complacent and arrogant, you think that you've solved this whole Covid thing, that you're unlike the rest of the world. There's Indian exceptionalism

in this regard, which, of course, turned out to be completely misplaced. But having done that, you then change the chief minister of the state, because he says, "Don't do this big festival this year," and put in somebody who will go along with your wishes. And we all can see the result.

We also have open anti-science behavior, because there are still members of the ruling party and ministers of the government who are going around claiming that cow dung and cow urine can help to either prevent or deal with and treat this disease. And when people have protested and written against that, they are the ones who are being arrested under the National Investigation Agency. So it's an extraordinary reversal of any kind of scientific protocols. I don't know what we have done as a country to get a government that would give us this kind of unscientific, and brutal approach to a pandemic. But this is what we have now.

In addition to the lack of health facilities, we are seeing that there is no attention to the livelihood crisis. We are getting terrifying reports of the increase in hunger even over the last year. Surveys that were done in October 2020 have found dramatic increases in hunger and undernutrition among ordinary people, even those who are not classified as poor. This was in October, after that we've had a second wave. We've had another set of closures and lockdowns. We've had more loss of livelihood, more decline in nominal wages, more loss of employment. So what is happening to hunger now is terrifying. And yet, we don't see the government making any real efforts. There's a half-hearted gesture of providing some free grain only to those who have a particular kind of ration card under the National Food Security Act, which leaves out at least 150 million people who also need this free food. And that's it. There's no mention of livelihood compensation, there's no mention



Waiting for food packets

Photo by PradeepGaur/Shutterstock

of anything that would provide people the basics with which to live.

BARSAMIAN: When you mentioned a regime that has anti-science tendencies, that resonates with the United States of America and its recently departed 45th President, as well. But I recall Prime Minister Modi at the Davos meeting of elites in late January, boasting about how well the virus has been contained, and that others could learn from what India has done. Your comment.

GHOSH: I think that speaks for itself. And this, by the way, was in the face of scientific advice given to him by his own advisors. So it was a complete riding roughshod over all of the serious analysts who were looking at this, who had observed the fact that there is an increase in cases coming from a new variant that has a potential to cause problems. Despite that, you seize on this because it is part of promoting a global image. And one thing this government has been very good at is promoting the global image. And it's really all about perception management, within India and outside India. Its focus is perception management.

Unfortunately, now, the reality is so severe that it's a tsunami over that particular set of perception management. But that is really all that it has focused all its attention, resources, and even its bureaucratic powers on. The only meeting the Prime Minister has had with all the secretaries of the Government of India in the last three months, the only one single meeting has been devoted to telling them how to deal with the bad publicity that is coming, and how to promote positivity in terms of, not Covid positive, but positivity about how well the government is doing in managing this.

BARSAMIAN: In an article for the journal SAMAJ, which is an acronym for South Asia

Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, the article is entitled "Hindutva, Economic Neoliberalism and the Abuse of Economic Statistics in India," you've written, "The ability of the government to persuade the public that the economy is doing well, or that adverse outcomes are not the result of its own policy actually serves the neoliberal agenda by taming the resentment of the poor, and enabling further concentration of wealth. The Modi government," and you mentioned this a few moments ago, "is focused on the management of perception, rather than on actually developing and implementing economic policies that would benefit the people. In this regard, manipulation and or destruction of the statistical system are decisive, which is why an aggressive attitude to economic statistics has become one of the defining features of the government."

GHOSH: I could give you many examples. The national accounts data has been manipulated with a new base year and changed in ways that would inflate the estimates of income, especially those coming from the industrial sector.

There are many reasons why there are over-estimates. There are lots of experts who have commented on this. So I don't want to go into it further. But it's fair to say it's an overestimate.

The consumption surveys, which used to be conducted every five years, the one that was conducted in 2017 was just simply suppressed. It wasn't published. A leaked report, because it is all ready and available and had been approved by the statistical agency, shows us that there was an absolute decline in consumption, largely because of the impact of other ill-planned moves like demonetization and a very poorly implemented Goods and Services Tax. But in 2017, there was a decline in consumption compared to six years

earlier. They didn't like that outcome. So they just simply suppressed the data. So we have no consumption data. What does that mean? We don't have data on poverty. For the first time in independent India, we have no idea how poverty has moved since 2011-12. Simply because they have refused to look at that data. And if you don't know how poverty has moved, then, of course, you're not going to do anything about it. What does that mean in terms of perceptions? People who are themselves suffering, feel that maybe that's their own situation, just their individual problem, or maybe it's the problem of their state government or their locality or something like that, or maybe they're unlucky. They don't

realize that this is a much broader process that is affecting many, many millions of people, and the majority of the population. And that's really the way this works, so that you can keep feeding a particular narrative. And everyone who's experiencing a different reality will think that that's only their own personal reality, rather than a broader process. **Z**

(Due to time constraints some portions of the interview were not included in the national broadcast. Those portions are included in this transcript.)



Burdwan Town, Purba Bardhaman District, West Bengal / India - 27.04.2020: Protests at the district food department demanding food in the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) situation. At Burdwan Town, India.

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