

Preface

Noam Chomsky

It is tempting, and plausible, to regard the current historical period as an “interregnum” in Antonio Gramsci’s sense, recalling his words on the crisis of his day, which “consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

The morbidity of many of the symptoms is all too apparent, and the crises are all too real.

The crises of our day come in two forms: some are merely very serious, while others are literally existential. In the latter category there are two crises, each posing challenges that have never arisen before in human history—literally challenges of survival, for humans and innumerable other species.

In their most critical form, both of these crises can be dated to the end of World War II. The first crisis is the nuclear age, which dawned on August 6, 1945, a day when those with eyes open understood that human intelligence had devised the means to destroy the species, and much else along with it. A review of the record of near accidents and reckless actions of leaders reveals that it is a near miracle that we have survived this long, and such miracles are unlikely to persist. One of the most sober, respected, and experienced nuclear strategists, William Perry, never given to exaggeration, says that he cannot understand why everyone is not as “terrified” as he is at the realization that “today, the danger of some sort of a nuclear catastrophe is greater than it was during the Cold War.” And

as he knows very well, the world has come ominously close to terminal war all too often.

Perry's judgment is not readily dismissed, particularly when one considers what is happening at the Russian border and the policies and rhetoric of the two major nuclear powers.

The permanent crisis of the nuclear age, with its regular near-explosions to terminal catastrophe, is deeply rooted in the structure of the nation-state system that has developed in recent centuries and will not be easy to dismantle in favor of a more humane and civilized social and political order.

The second existential crisis, which is already well underway, is also deeply rooted in core institutional structures of modern society, which will also not be easy to dismantle: the environmental crisis, termed by geologists the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which humans are radically altering the environment in ways that portend major catastrophes. These catastrophes are already being endured by species that are rapidly succumbing during the Sixth Extinction, now in progress, and threatening to rival the Fifth Extinction some sixty-five million years ago when 75 percent of plant and animal species were destroyed after a huge asteroid hit the earth.

There has been debate about the dating of the onset of the Anthropocene, but professional opinion is converging on the same time as the onset of the nuclear age, the end of World War II. Whether this crisis can be brought under control in time is not at all clear. And as in the case of the nuclear age, a look at the reactions of systems of power is far from reassuring. Instructive illustrative examples include Denmark, Germany, China, and the United States. Denmark and Germany are aiming to reach full reliance on renewable energy within several decades and are taking serious steps towards that goal. China, already well in the lead in developing and producing renewables, primarily solar and wind, has announced plans

to spend more than \$360 billion through 2020 on renewable power sources, also creating over thirteen million jobs in these industries.

What about the United States? It had been a participant, even sometimes a prominent participant, in the enterprise of confronting the crisis of global warming, but that changed radically on November 8, 2016, with the victory of a political organization that is, quite literally, dedicated to destroying the hope for the survival of organized human life.

The last comment should strike readers as extreme, if not scandalous, until they look at the simple facts. In the Republican primaries, every candidate either denied that what is happening is happening, or said that maybe it is (who knows?) but we shouldn't do anything about it. The candidate hailed as the adult in the room, Ohio governor John Kasich, declared proudly that "we are going to burn [coal] in Ohio and we are not going to apologize for it." The winning candidate, who dismissed global warming as a hoax, calls for rapid increase in use of coal and other fossil fuels, dismantling of regulations, rejection of help to developing countries seeking to move to sustainable energy, and in general racing to the cliff as fast as possible.

In brief, all three branches of government in the world's most powerful state have been taken over by a political organization dedicated to destroying the hope for the survival of organized life, no exaggeration, and a fact that should elicit regular screaming headlines in a free press.

All of this came to a head on November 8, when some two hundred nations were meeting in Marrakech, Morocco, to try to put some teeth into the 2015 Paris negotiations (COP21) on climate change. It had been hoped that COP21 would lead to a treaty with verifiable commitments. But that hope was dashed by the refusal of the Republican Congress to accept binding commitments. The Marrakech COP22 meetings intended to address that stunning failure. On November 8, as the electoral

results came in, the proceedings pretty much came to a halt. The prevailing question was now whether the enterprise could even continue with the most powerful country in history in the hands of an organization that not only refuses to participate but is dead set on undermining possibilities of success. Delegates looked to China as the hope for rescuing the world from the wrecking machine that now controls the leader of the Free World. An astonishing spectacle, which passed with virtually no comment.

The scale of the crisis is hard to exaggerate. And it is also hard to find words to capture appropriately that all of this is passing with scant notice right where the lethal sore is festering.

Even if the U.S. were to rejoin the world, the path forward is by no means clear. On November 8, before the electoral results began to appear, the World Meteorological Association delivered its verdict on the state of the Anthropocene to the nations assembled at Marrakech. Though no surprise to those who have been following the reports in scientific journals, and sometimes the general press, the verdict was grim. The limits set as goals in Paris were already being approached. Major steps have to be taken, and soon, or it may be too late to avert truly dire consequences.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, much as in the case of the terrifying threat of nuclear weapons, the environmental crisis is institutional, deeply rooted in economic institutions geared to accumulation, profit, and often sociopathic forms of growth. These institutional structures are not easily dismantled, but dismantled they must be, at least significantly changed, if life on earth is to persist in anything like the form to which we should aspire.

Attention to the institutional structures that lie at the roots of the two existential crises brings us to the second category of crises, those that are merely extremely severe. And as should be clear, the graver and lesser crises are intimately

related. Without significant and perhaps dramatic changes in the institutional structures, the existential crises are likely to determine the fate of the species.

For a generation, under U.S. leadership much of the world has—not for the first time—been subjected to the doctrines of the “religion” that the market knows best, to borrow the phrase of economist Joseph Stiglitz twenty years ago, warning against blind faith in the religion. We should bear in mind, however, that like many others, the neoliberal religion readily accommodates what Pascal called “the utility of interpretations” in his satirical account of how the guardians of the faith devise modes of escape when convenient.

The neoliberal assault on the world’s population in the past generation has been regarded very highly by elite opinion. Much has been made of the remarkable decline in global poverty during the neoliberal period, commonly overlooking the not insignificant fact—pointed out by political economist Robert Wade among others—that the achievement relies very largely on China, which paid little heed to the doctrines of the faith, and others who took the same path. In the United States, professional and other opinion was awed by the grand success of the “Great Moderation,” managed by the skillful hands of Alan Greenspan—“Saint Alan” as he was sometimes called, until the whole edifice crashed magnificently in 2008 with the bursting of a multi-trillion-dollar housing bubble that somehow escaped notice, apart from a very few perceptive economists like Dean Baker.

Not all were awed by the successes of the Great Moderation. Notably missing from the chorus of approval were American workers, who were not cheering loudly in the streets about the significant decline in real wages for (non-supervisory) workers from 1979, when the experiment was in its earliest stages, to 2007, when euphoria about its successes was at its peak right before the crash. The performance is reminiscent of the days of the Brazilian military dictatorship, when ruling

general Emilio Medici commented, “*The economy is doing fine, but the people aren’t.*”

The achievements were summarized accurately in the title of an instructive report of the Economic Policy Institute: *Failure by Design*. Contrary to Thatcher’s famous TINA slogan, “there is no alternative,” alternatives were always quite feasible. And as the study points out, the “failure” is class-based. As commonly the case, there is no failure for the designers—who can count on the public to bail them out when they get into trouble. The public bailouts are the least of the public subsidy to the financial institutions that increasingly dominate the neoliberal economy. An IMF study revealed that much of the profit of the top U.S. banks derives from the implicit insurance policy provided by the government, providing them many advantages.

Others suffered far more severely from the neoliberal onslaught. The imposition of “market reforms” in Russia devastated the economy and led to millions of deaths, setting the stage for much of the ugliness of the subsequent period. Latin America suffered two “lost decades,” finally breaking out of the stranglehold, partly at least, in this millennium. One sign is that the IMF, pretty much an agent of the U.S. Treasury Department, has been expelled from the region, as from East Asia after the late ’90s crisis there. The savage neoliberal austerity programs of the European Union bureaucracy, heavily under the influence of northern banks, have been so irrational on economic grounds that even the IMF economists have sharply criticized them—while the IMF political figures have joined in imposing harsh and destructive austerity programs on the most vulnerable, with grim effects. The economist Marc Weisbrot, in a careful and well-documented review of the general history in his book *Failed: What the “Experts” Got Wrong about the Global Economy*, makes a persuasive case that one goal of the policies has been to dismantle the social democratic policies that were one of Europe’s contributions to civilized life in

the post-World War II period but were unwelcome to major centers of traditional power.

One important element of the neoliberal onslaught is the severe decline in functioning democracy, revealing itself in many ways, even more so in Europe than in the United States.

Returning to Gramsci's phrase, the current interregnum has evoked popular reactions, some of them morbid indeed, notably the rise of neofascist movements particularly in Europe, and some much more hopeful: in the U.S., the remarkable success of the Sanders mobilization, which probably would have taken over the Democratic Party if it had not been blocked by the maneuverings of the apparatchiks. Among the young, a large majority favored Sanders, whose campaign departed sharply from the norm of "bought elections" that has long prevailed. There are similar developments in Europe. It is true that "the new cannot be born," yet. But the forms it might assume will depend on actions taken now and the visions of a future society that animate them.

It is to these critical questions that *Practical Utopia* is dedicated. Few have thought as long and hard about these matters as Michael Albert, along with constructive efforts to planting the "seeds of the future in the present." What he presents here is the distillation of a life of searching thought and dedicated activism that merits great respect and close attention.

