Noam Chomsky: Ecology, Ethics, Anarchism

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Also See: Noam Chomsky | The Prospects for Survival

(Image: Jared Rodriguez / Truthout)

There can be little doubt about the centrality and severity of the environmental crisis in the present day. Driven by the mindless "grow-or-die" imperative of capitalism, humanity's destruction of the biosphere has reached and even surpassed various critical thresholds, whether in terms of carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, freshwater depletion, or chemical pollution. Extreme weather events can be seen pummeling the globe, from the Philippines - devastated by Typhoon Haiyan in November of last year - to California, which is presently suffering from the worst drought in centuries. As Nafeez Ahmed has shown, a recently published study funded in part by NASA warns of impending civilizational collapse without radical changes to address social inequality and overconsumption. *Truthout*'s own Dahr Jamail has written a number of critical pieces lately that have documented the profundity of the current trajectory toward anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD) and global ecocide: In a telling metaphor, he likens the increasingly mad weather patterns brought about by ACD to an electrocardiogram of a "heart in defibrillation."

Rather than conclude that such distressing trends follow intrinsically from an "aggressive" and "sociopathic" human nature, reasonable observers should likely associate the outgrowth of these tendencies with the dominance of the capitalist system, for, as Oxfam noted in a January 2014 report, the richest 85 individuals in the world possess as much wealth as a whole half of humanity - the 3.5 billion poorest people - while just 90 corporations have been responsible for a full two-thirds of the carbon emissions generated since the onset of industrialism. As these staggering statistics show, then, the ecological and climatic crises correspond to the extreme concentration of power and wealth produced by capitalism and upheld by the world's governments. As a counter-move to these realities, the political philosophy of anarchism - which opposes the rule of both state and capital - may hold a great deal of promise for ameliorating and perhaps even overturning these trends toward destruction. Apropos, I had the great good fortune recently to interview Professor Noam Chomsky, renowned anarcho-syndicalist, to discuss the question of ecological crisis and anarchism as a remedy. Following is a transcript of our conversation.

JAVIER SETHNESS FOR TRUTHOUT: Professor Chomsky, thank you so kindly for taking the time today to converse with me about ecology and anarchism. It is a true honor to have this opportunity to speak with you. Before we pass to these subjects, though, I would like to ask you initially about ethics and solidarity. Would you say that Immanuel Kant's notion of treating humanity as an end in itself has influenced anarchist and anti-authoritarian thought in any way? The concept of natural law arguably has a "natural" affinity with anarchism.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Indirectly, but I think it's actually more general. My own view is that anarchism flows quite naturally out of major concerns and commitments of the Enlightenment, which found an expression in classical liberalism, and classical liberalism essentially was destroyed by the rise of capitalism - it's inconsistent with it. But anarchism, I think, is the inheritor of the ideals that were developed in one or another form during the Enlightenment - Kant's expression is one example - exemplified in a particular way in classical liberal doctrine, wrecked on the shoals of capitalism, and picked up by the libertarian left movements, which are the natural inheritors of them. So in that sense, yes, but it's broader.

You have described humanity as being imperiled by the destructive trends on hand in capitalist society - or what you have termed "really existing capitalist democracies" (RECD). Particularly of late, you have emphasized the brutally anti-ecological trends being implemented by the dominant powers of settler-colonial societies, as reflected in the tar sands of Canada, Australia's massive exploitation and export of coal resources, and, of course, the immense energy profligacy of this country. You certainly have a point, and I share your concerns, as I detail in *Imperiled Life: Revolution against Climate Catastrophe*, a book that frames the climate crisis as the outgrowth of capitalism and the domination of nature generally understood. Please explain how you see RECD as profoundly at odds with ecological balance.

The task of the state is to rescue the rich and the powerful and to protect them, and if that violates market principles, okay, we don't care about market principles. The market principles are essentially for the poor.

RECD - not accidentally, pronounced "wrecked" - is really existing capitalist democracy, really a kind of state capitalism, with a powerful state component in the economy, but with some reliance on market forces. The market forces that exist are shaped and distorted in the interests of the powerful - by state power, which is heavily under the control of concentrations of private power - so there's close interaction. Well, if you take a look at markets, they are a recipe for suicide. Period. In market systems, you don't take account of what economists call externalities. So say you sell me a car. In a market system, we're supposed to look after our own interests, so I make the best deal I can for me; you make the best deal you can for you. We do not take into account the effect on *him*. That's not part of a market transaction. Well, there is an effect on him: there's another car on the road; there's a greater possibility of accidents; there's more pollution; there's more traffic jams. For him individually, it might be a slight increase, but this is extended over the whole population. Now, when you get to other kinds of transactions, the externalities get much larger. So take the financial crisis. One of the reasons for it is that - there are several, but one is - say if Goldman Sachs makes a risky transaction, they - if they're paying attention - cover their own

potential losses. They do *not* take into account what's called systemic risk, that is, the possibility that the whole system will crash if one of their risky transactions goes bad. That just about happened with AIG, the huge insurance company. They were involved in risky transactions which they couldn't cover. The whole system was really going to collapse, but of course state power intervened to rescue them. The task of the state is to rescue the rich and the powerful and to protect them, and if that violates market principles, okay, we don't care about market principles. The market principles are essentially for the poor. But systemic risk is an externality that's not considered, which would take down the system repeatedly, if you didn't have state power intervening. Well there's another one, that's even bigger - that's destruction of the environment. Destruction of the environment is an externality: in market interactions, you don't pay attention to it. So take tar sands. If you're a major energy corporation and you can make profit out of exploiting tar sands, you simply do not take into account the fact that your grandchildren may not have a possibility of survival - that's an externality. And in the moral calculus of capitalism, greater profits in the next quarter outweigh the fate of your grandchildren - and of course it's not your grandchildren, but everyone's.

Now the settler-colonial societies are particularly interesting in this regard because you have a conflict within them. Settler-colonial societies are different than most forms of imperialism; in traditional imperialism, say the British in India, the British kind of ran the place: They sent the bureaucrats, the administrators, the officer corps, and so on, but the place was run by Indians. Settler-colonial societies are different; they eliminate the indigenous population. Read, say, George Washington, a leading figure in the settler-colonial society we live in. His view was - his words - was that we have to "extirpate" the Iroquois; they're in our way. They were an advanced civilization; in fact, they provided some of the basis for the American constitutional system, but they were in the way, so we have to extirpate them. Thomas Jefferson, another great figure, he said, well, we have no choice but to exterminate the indigenous population, the Native Americans; the reason is they're attacking us. Why are they attacking us? Because we're taking everything away from them. But since we're taking their land and resources away and they defend themselves, we have to *exterminate* them. And that's pretty much what happened - in the United States almost totally - huge extermination. Some residues remain, but under horrible conditions. Australia, same thing. Tasmania, almost total extermination. Canada, they didn't quite make it. There's residues of what are called First Nations around the periphery. Now, those are settler-colonial societies: there are elements of the indigenous populations remaining, and a very striking feature of contemporary society is that, throughout the world - in Canada, Latin America, Australia, India, all over the world, the indigenous societies - what we call tribal or aboriginal or whatever name we use - *they're* the ones who are trying to prevent the race to destruction. Everywhere, they're the ones leading the opposition to destruction of the environment. In countries with substantial indigenous populations, like say in Ecuador and Bolivia, they've passed legislation, even constitutional provisions, calling for rights of nature, which is kind of laughed at in the rich, powerful countries, but is the hope for survival.

Ecuador, for example, made an offer to Europe - they have a fair amount of oil - to leave the oil in the ground, where it ought to be, at a great loss to them - huge loss for development. The request was that Europe would provide them with a fraction - payment - of the loss - a small fraction - but the Europeans refused, so now they're exploiting the oil. And if you go to southern Colombia, you find indigenous people, *campesinos*, Afro-Americans struggling against gold

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mining, just horrible destruction. Same in Australia, against uranium mining; and so on. At the same time, in the settler-colonial societies, which are the most advanced and richest, *that's* where the drive is *strongest* toward the destruction of the environment. So you read a speech by, say, Obama, for example, at Cushing, Oklahoma - Cushing is kind of the center for bringing together and storing the fossil fuels which flow into there and are distributed. It was an audience of oil types. To enormous applause, he said that during his administration more oil had been lifted than any previous one - for many, many years. He said pipelines are crossing America under his administration to the extent that practically everywhere you go, you're tripping across a pipeline; we're going to have 100 years of energy independence; we'll be the Saudi Arabia of the 21st century - in short, we'll *lead* the way to disaster. At the same time, the remnants of the indigenous societies are trying to prevent the race to disaster. So in this respect, the settler-colonial societies are a striking illustration of, first of all, the massive destructive power of European imperialism, which of course includes us and Australia, and so on. And also the - I don't know if you'd call it irony, but the strange phenomenon of the most so-called "advanced," educated, richest segments of global society trying to destroy all of us, and the so-called "backward" people, the pre-technological people, who remain on the periphery, trying to restrain the race to disaster. If some extraterrestrial observer were watching this, they'd think the species was insane. And, in fact, it is. But the insanity goes back to the basic institutional structure of RECD. That's the way it works. It's built into the institutions. It's one of the reasons it's going to be very hard to change.

In *Nuclear War and Environmental Catastrophe* (2013), you argue that global society must be reorganized so that "care for 'the commons' [...] become[s] a very high priority, as it has been in traditional societies, quite often."(1) You make similar conclusions in an essay from last summer reflecting on the importance of the efforts to defend Gezi Park in Istanbul, which you frame as being part of a "a struggle in which we must all take part, with dedication and resolve, if there is to be any hope for decent human survival in a world that has no borders." How do you see the possibility of thoroughgoing social transformation and the devolution of power taking place in the near future - through the emergence and sustained replication of workers' and community councils, as in the participatory economic model (Parecon), for example?

That's a well-worked out, detailed proposal for one form of democratic control of popular institutions - social, economic, political, others. And it is particularly well-worked out, in extensive detail. Whether that's the right form or something other, I think it's a little early to tell. My own feeling is that a fair amount of experimentation has to be done to see how societies can and should function. I'm a little skeptical about the possibility of sketching it in detail in advance. But that certainly should be taken very seriously, along with other proposals. But something along those lines seems to me a prerequisite first of all for reasonable life, put aside the environment - just the way a society ought to work, with people in a position where they can make decisions about the things that matter to them. But also I think it is a prerequisite for survival at this point. I mean, the human species is reaching a point which is *unique* in human history - just take a look at species' destruction, forget humans. Species destruction now is at the level of 65 million years ago, when an asteroid hit the Earth and destroyed the dinosaurs and a huge number of species - massive species destruction. That's being replicated right now, and humans are the asteroid. And we're on the list, not far.

In a speech reproduced over 20 years ago in the film version of *Manufacturing Consent*, you describe hegemonic capitalist ideology as reducing the life-world of Earth to an "infinite

resource" and "an infinite garbage can." Even then, you had identified the capitalist tendency toward total destruction: you speak of a looming cancellation of destiny for humanity if the madness of capitalism is not halted within this, the "possibly terminal phase of human existence." The very title and argumentation of *Hegemony or Survival* (2003) continue in this line, and in *Hopes and Prospects* (2010), you claim the threat to the chance for decent survival to be one of the major externalities produced, again, by RECD. How do you think a resurgent international anarchist movement might respond positively to such alarming trends?

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In my view, anarchism is just the most advanced form of political thought. As I've said, it draws from the Enlightenment, its best ideals; the primary contributions of classical liberalism carry it forward. Parecon, which you mentioned, is one illustration - they don't call themselves anarchists - but there are others like it. So I think that a resurgent anarchist movement, which would be the peak of human intellectual civilization, should join with the indigenous societies of the world so that they don't have the burden to save humanity from its own craziness. This should take place within the richest, most powerful societies. It's kind of a moral truism that the more privilege you have, the more responsibility you have. It's elementary in every domain: you have privilege; you have opportunities; you have choices: you have responsibilities. In the rich, powerful societies, privileged people like us - we're all privileged people - we have the responsibility to take the lead in trying to prevent the disasters that our own social institutions are creating. It's outrageous to demand or *even observe* the poorest, most repressed people in the world taking the lead in trying to save the human species and in fact innumerable other species from destruction. So we should join them. That's the role of an anarchist movement.

In "Human Intelligence and the Environment" (2010), you raise the possibility of factory workers taking control of the means of production and autonomously deciding to break with business as usual, opting instead to produce solar panels or high-speed rail. This recommendation is entirely anarcho-syndicalist in nature, in keeping with your own proclivities: indeed, it bears much affinity with the prospect of an ecological anarcho-syndicalism, a concept that has been advanced by the Environment Union Caucus of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW-EUC) recently. A particularly promising proposal the EUC has made is that of an ecological general strike. In a similar vein, economic historian Richard Smith recently called for the mass shuttering of large corporations and vast swathes of industry as a means of giving humanity and nature a chance against climate destruction. Moreover, since the US military is the single largest contributor to the problem of anthropogenic climate disruption, the Pentagon should effectively be dismantled for this reason, among others, of course. How might activists present these pressing goals in ways that do not lend themselves to being dismissed as mere utopianism?

Well, let's take the idea of converting industry to producing solar panels, mass-transportation, and so on. That

was not utopian. The US government virtually nationalized the auto industry a couple years ago - not entirely, but took over large parts of it. There were choices at that point. If there *had* been a powerful movement of the kind that we're discussing, with a popular base, it could have pressed for something very realistic, which I think would have had the support of the working class. A strike will be regarded as a weapon against them - it's taking away their livelihoods, their survival. The choices were two, really: either the government rescues the auto industry at the taxpayers' expense and hands it back to pretty much the original owners, maybe different faces, but structurally the same owners, and have them produce what they were doing before, which is destructive. That was one possibility; that was the one that was taken. The other possibility, which *could* have been taken, and with a sufficient powerful popular movement might *well* have been taken, is to put those factories into the hands in the working class, and have them make their choices rationally, in the interests of themselves, their communities, the general society - and do exactly what you were describing: produce solar panels.

Take mass transportation. Going back to markets - if you take an economics course, they tell you markets offer choices. That's partly true, but very narrowly. Markets restrict choices, sharply restrict choices. Mass transportation is an example. Mass transportation is *not* a choice offered on the market. If I want to go home today, the market *does* offer me a choice between a Ford and a Toyota, but not between a car and a subway. That's just not one of the choices available in market systems, and this is not a small point. Choices that involve common effort and solidarity and mutual support and concern for others - those are out of the market system. The market system is based on maximization of individual consumption, and that is highly destructive in itself. It's destructive even for the human beings involved - it turns them into sociopathic individuals. But it also means that the kinds of things that are *needed* for survival are out of the market system - like mass-transportation. That's the form of economic growth that could help preserve the hopes for survival. I don't think that it was at all unrealistic for that to have been done; there was nothing utopian about that.

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Now as compared with things like say general strikes, I think that's much a better step to take. It's not saying, let's throw a wrench in the machine and harm everybody in the interest of some longer-term goal. It's saying, let's take a wrench and *fix* the machine, so it can function right now, with all you guys working, doing better jobs, running it yourselves. You're better off psychologically, socially, in every respect, and you're also producing a world that makes sense to live in. That's, I think, the better way to proceed, in general.

According to German critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, revolution can be defined in part as action which seeks to secure the life, freedom, and happiness of future generations.(2) In light of looming catastrophic climate change, this definition would seem to hold a great amount of importance today. Within the modern Western revolutionary tradition, some of the most promising movements have arguably been Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals, Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacus League, and the Spanish anarchists. What would you say is the role of direct action in revolutionary struggle?

First of all, I think we shouldn't assume that revolutionary struggle is the only option. What we've just been

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discussing, for example, you can call reformist if you like: it's taking the institutions, reshaping them, reconstructing them, turning them into democratic institutions, and carrying out actions that are quite feasible and would be beneficial for all of us. Is that a revolution, is it a reform? Who knows? What's the role of direct action, say, in that? Well, the role of direct action *would* have been realistically for popular movements to have pressured the government to take that direction, which would not have been impossible. In fact, right now in the Rust Belt - something like this happened in the old Rust Belt, on a much smaller scale. Back in 1977, US Steel, a major corporation, decided to close its operations in Youngstown, Ohio, which was a steel town that had been built by steelworkers, by the union; it was a major steel town. That was going to destroy everyone's occupation, the community, the society, everything - and it's a decision made by bankers somewhere, who weren't making enough profit. The steelworkers union offered to buy the plants and have them run by the workforce. This was an effort that the corporation didn't want. Actually it's kind of interesting - it would have been more profitable for them, but I think a class interest militated against it. This happens frequently. A multinational frequently will refuse an offer by the workers to buy out something they want to close and prefer to take the loss of just destroying it to having the precedent of worker-owned enterprises. That's what it looks like to me; I can't prove it. Corporations are totalitarian institutions - we don't get access to their internal decisions - but that's what it looks like.

Anyway, the company refused, and it went to the courts. I think it went all the way to the Supreme Court. Staughton Lynd argued the case for the community and the steelworkers; they lost, but they could have won, with enough popular support. Anyhow, after they lost, the steel [factories] were abandoned, but they didn't give up. Working people started developing small enterprises - worker-owned - which they tried to integrate into the community, and it's now proliferated significantly. Around Cleveland, northern Ohio, there's quite a network of worker-owned enterprises - not worker-managed. There's a gap. But worker-owned enterprises which can become worker-managed. It's expanding. Right now there's an effort by the US steelworkers union to make some sort of a deal with Mondragón, the huge Basque conglomerate which is again worker-owned, with management selected by workers, but not worker-managed. And that's got some prospects, too.

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So what is direct action? Well, all of these things are direct action; they're direct action geared to the existing circumstances. Direct action has to be based on an analysis of what the existing circumstances are, and how an action can modify them positively. There's no general formula; you can't say direct action is good or bad. Sometimes it can harmful, sometimes it can be beneficial; sometimes it can be revolutionary, sometimes it can be reformist. You simply ask yourself what can be achieved now. So these developments in, say, northern Ohio, really are reformist - they're even supported by Republican governors and by some sectors of business, because it sort of fits their right-wing, libertarian conceptions. Fine, let's pursue that - nothing wrong with it. But you just can't give general formulas for tactical choices. They depend on an exact, close analysis of the situation.

The Spartacists are a good case in point. Rosa Luxemburg went along with the Spartacist uprising, though she was opposed to it. She was opposed to it not in principle but because she realized it was going to fail, was going to be crushed. But out of solidarity she went along with it, and she was killed.

Returning to the question of natural law, I would like to ask whether you think natural right applies to non-human animals? In an interview from 2010, you acknowledged that there exists a "moral case" for vegetarianism, but at a recent talk at University College London, you claimed that animals cannot have the same rights as humans because, lacking reason, they cannot be considered to have responsibilities. Can you clarify what you mean by this? As you likely know, many anarchists and anti-authoritarians today consider vegetarianism and veganism essential to the project of reducing humanity's domination over nature.

That makes sense, but that's separate from the question of whether animals have the same rights as humans. It's a fact that animals don't have responsibilities; we can't overlook that. If I have a dog, the dog has no responsibilities. Maybe I'd like it to bark when a criminal comes, but I can't say the dog's guilty if it didn't do it. So it's a fact that animals don't have responsibilities. Responsibilities are related to rights. This does not say you should murder animals, but it is a recognition of reality. In fact, vegetarianism or veganism, I think, have a moral basis. But so do lots of other things. Like when you got here, you drove or took public transportation, meaning you used energy - that harms the environment. You made a choice: your choice was to harm the environment in order to come here so we could have this discussion. We're making choices like that every moment of the day. Well, one of the choices has to do with people in countries where there is meat, but not much else: should they eat it? That's another choice. We have our own choices. We are always - we can't overlook the fact that we are constantly making choices which have negative effects, and this is one of them. There is an opportunity cost to vegetarianism.

Personally, I'm not a vegetarian - I almost never eat meat. The reason is I just don't have time for it; I don't have the time to think about it; I don't want to think about it. I just pick up whatever saves me time, which usually is not meat, but I don't purposely check to see if there's a piece of chicken in the salad. Okay, that's a choice. I don't like - I don't think we should have factory farming; the free-range business is mostly a joke - I understand that very well. With regard to rights and responsibilities, they do relate, and I don't think we can overlook that. You can say the same about an infant: an infant doesn't have responsibilities. But the reason we grant the infant rights is because of speciesism, and you can't overlook that, either.

In theoretical terms, I sense a great affinity between the analysis you and Edward S. Herman present in *Manufacturing Consent* and the dissident cultural research engaged in by Western Marxists during the twentieth century. You are famously given to quoting Antonio Gramsci's saying, "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." I would like to ask whether you believe the US populace to be too conservative, distracted, and enthralled by the system to move radically against it? Do you think the public will become the "second superpower" you hope for in *Hegemony or Survival*?

I'm not sure the public is that conservative, frankly. There are some interesting indications to the contrary. So for example in 1976, the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, there were polls taken in which

people were asked what they thought was in the Constitution. Nobody has a clue what's in the Constitution. But the answers basically were: Do you think this is an obvious truth, and if it is - it's probably in the Constitution. One of the questions was "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," and the majority of the population thought that was in the Constitution, because it's obviously true. In the late 1980s, there were polls taken asking people, "do you think that a right to health care is in the Constitution?" A very large proportion, I think maybe a majority of the population, thought it was in the Constitution. If you take a look at polls generally, you find that even among sectors of the population that are considered very right-wing - you do studies of people who say, "get the government off my back, I don't want the government" - they turn out to be social democrats. They want more spending on health, more spending on education, more spending on, say, mothers with dependent children - but not welfare, because welfare was demonized by racists, Reagan and others. And this runs across the board, even on international affairs. So a majority of the population thinks that the US ought to give up the veto at the Security Council, and follow what the general world population believes is right. You take a look at taxes, and it's striking. There've been polls on taxes for about 40 years. Overwhelmingly, the population thinks the rich should be taxed more - they're undertaxed. The policy goes in the opposite direction. Polls are not definitive: you have to inquire into why people are answering the way they do; there could be a lot of reasons. But they're not insignificant, either.

My own feeling is that people like Adam Smith were basically right, that there is a natural sympathy for others. I think the rich and powerful understand that. I think that's one of the reasons why there's such massive effort to destroy the institutions in the society that are based on solidarity.

My own feeling is that people like Adam Smith were basically right, that there is a natural sympathy for others. I think the rich and powerful understand that. I think that's one of the reasons why there's such massive effort to destroy the institutions in the society that are based on solidarity. So, for example, why is the right wing - and in fact not just the right wing, because it goes over to Obama - so intent on undermining Social Security? It costs nothing, essentially; it's a very efficient program; people survive on it; it works very well; there's no economic problems that couldn't be tinkered with - it's really marginal. But there's a major effort to destroy it. Why? It's based on solidarity. It's based on concern for others. There's a major attack on the public schools - deep underfunding, vouchers, all kinds of things. Foundations are trying to undermine them. Why? Public schools are a major contribution to modern society. They're one of the real contributions of American society - mass public education. Why destroy them? Well, they're based on solidarity. If you take the ideology that we're supposed to believe in, why should I pay taxes for the schools in my neighborhood? I don't have kids in school, I don't have grandchildren in school, and I never will. Why should I pay taxes? Well, you pay taxes so that the kid across the street will go to school, *because you care about other people*. But that has to be driven out of people's heads. It's a little like markets and consumption. Markets are favored by the economics profession, by the rich, and so on, up to a point - they really don't believe in them, they want the powerful state to come in and save them if they're in trouble. But ideologically they're preferred, because they restrict human action to individual self-gratification - not mutual support, not protection of the commons.

Actually the commons are an interesting case. We're coming up to the eight hundredth anniversary of the Magna Carta.

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The Magna Carta had two parts. One part was the Charter of Liberties - the central part was presumption of innocence. That's out the window. By now, being "guilty" means Obama wants to kill you tomorrow; that's the definition of guilty. "Innocent" means he hasn't gotten around to it yet. But the other part of the Magna Carta was the Charter of the Forests - that's the part that you find in popular myth, like the Robin Hood myths. Robin Hood was protecting the commons from the predators. That's a big part of our history - English history. The commons were cultivated by the general population. The commons were the forests, the fields, the source of fuel, food, welfare - you know, widows would pick things from the forest to survive. And it was nurtured - it was nurtured by the public, it was cared for - they weren't let to grow into jungles. They were carefully cared for. The Charter of the Forests was an effort not by the population but by the barons to protect the commons from the king, but the population wanted to protect the commons for themselves.

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Then you move into the capitalist period, beginning with the enclosure movements which drove people off the land and so on, and you have a destruction of the commons. Today, in the capitalist ethic, there's a concept called the "tragedy of the commons" which you study in economics, which teaches you that if you don't have private ownership of the commons, it's going to be destroyed. Well, based on capitalist morality, that's true. If I don't own it, what should I do to try to preserve it? But in ordinary human life, that's just totally false. Privatization is the tragedy of the commons. We can see that in fact: When you privatize the commons, it gets destroyed for private profit. If the commons are kept under common control, they are cultivated and nurtured, because people care about each other, and they care about the future. When you ask, is the population conservative? I doubt it. I think these are deeply rooted sentiments and understandings which show up all the time: They showed up in labor struggles against the industrial system which was dehumanizing people, in peasant societies they show up, in indigenous societies today struggling against, say, gold mines - maybe it'll give them more material wealth, but it'll destroy their lives. You find this everywhere. And in the great thinkers of the past, you know, in the people we aren't supposed to admire, like Adam Smith, it's a central doctrine.

Privatization is the tragedy of the commons. We can see that in fact: When you privatize the commons, it gets destroyed for private profit. If the commons are kept under common control, they are cultivated and nurtured, because people care about each other, and they care about the future.

Actually it's kind of interesting, if you look at Smith - everybody knows the phrase "invisible hand," but practically nobody looks at how he used the phrase. He rarely used it, a couple of times. One of the uses is when he discusses what would happen - it's an agrarian society he's talking about - what would happen if some landlord controlled almost all the land? What would happen? He says, well, out of his natural sympathy and concern for other people, he would distribute the wealth, so, as if by an invisible hand, society would end up being egalitarian. That's the invisible hand. The other major usage of it actually is in an argument against - *against* - what we call neoliberal globalization. He considers England and asks what would happen if in England

the merchants and manufacturers decided to invest abroad and import from abroad. He says, they would gain, and England would suffer. However, they have a kind of natural tendency to want to function in their own society - a kind of a "home bias," it's sometimes called, kind of like an affinity to their own societies. So as if by an invisible hand, England will be saved from the ravages of what we call neoliberal globalization. That's not what you're taught. But they're coming from a different era. That's the precapitalist era, and conceptions were quite different before capitalist morality distorted them.

1. Noam Chomsky and Laray Polk, *Nuclear War and Environmental Catastrophe* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2013), 83.

2. Herbert Marcuse, "Ethics and Revolution," in *Ethics and Society: Original Essays on Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Richard T. De George (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), 140-1.