

# Nafeez Ahmed

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Jessica Knezy, Zoe Varenne, Nafeez Ahmed, Tom Pegram

### Tom Pegram 00:01

Hi, and welcome to 'Imperfect Utopias' based out of the UCL Global Governance Institute. This is a podcast about the challenges facing humanity and possible global responses. If you're new to the show, and you want to get a list of our favourite books other resources, listen to past shows, and join our community go to [ucl.ac.uk/global-governance](http://ucl.ac.uk/global-governance).

### Tom Pegram 00:34

I'm delighted to welcome Nafeez Ahmed to our podcast today, Nafeez is an investigative journalist, founding editor and chief writer for INSURGE intelligence and 'System Shift' columnist at VICE's science magazine Motherboard. He holds a DPhil in International Relations from the University of Sussex and is the author of a number of books including 'Failing States, Collapsing Systems: BioPhysical Triggers of Political Violence' and 'A User's Guide to the Crisis of Civilization,' which has also been turned into a great documentary, which I really highly recommend checking out. Drawing upon his research and Nafeez is developing a unique form of what he calls systems journalism, intended to throw light on the truth scale of the planetary crisis, how this crisis demonstrates the inevitability of the demise of the prevailing system, and what true systems change inside and out might look like. His work explores what it means to be in the midst of a fundamental civilizational transition, where old paradigms are collapsing, and giving rise to a lot of political turbulence and in Gramsci's words "morbid symptoms." However, he also believes that this is a moment, an opportunity to push for a new emerging paradigm, one in which we find ways to live together in our diversity, and thrive within planetary boundaries. Much of his writing powerfully conveys this sense of living in momentous, unsettling times, a time when we need independent thinking, and journalism, if we're to thread the needle of constraint breakdown, and renewal. So thanks so much for joining us today Nafeez, lots to talk about. Before we begin, if our podcrew on the call today could introduce themselves.

### Jessica Knezy 02:27

Hi, I'm Jessica and I work on the video editing and some of the research for the podcast.

**Zoe Varenne** 02:33

I am. So I do primarily research and sort of sorting out admin on the podcast.

**Tom Pegram** 02:39

Great. So Nafeez systems thinking, drawing on complexity, science has definitely been on my radar recently in light of the COVID crisis. However, as you'll know, it's still often overlooked or perhaps misunderstood by many International Relations scholars, and rarely features on our core syllabuses. Perhaps we can begin there. So why in 2020, is it so important when trying to understand global politics to think in terms of systems? Why does so many disaster risk experts now believe that this is an absolute imperative? And I'm also curious as to why it has proven such a challenge to think in systems terms, outside the somewhat boutique silos, if you will, of disaster risk, ecosystem management and military strategy.

**Nafeez Ahmed** 03:34

Thanks, Tom. Well, pleasure to join you on the show. And it's a big question that you've asked actually it's quite a big question. And I think it's something that, coming from an IR background, it's something I've grappled with from the beginning. And I guess I felt a sense of, you know, I felt a sense of frustration, you know, as an IR student. And it also, you know, when I was doing my research, and even after that, when I was teaching, I felt frustration at the lack of systems awareness within some of the main kind of disciplines of IR. And I think that's still like a quite serious deficit. I think there's lots of different explanations for it. But I think one thing is clear from, we start from 2020, as you said, you know, how is it that 2020 gives us that big realisation and wakeup call that actually we really do need to grapple with systems thinking, I think, we can really see this year, the way in which so many things have kicked off at the same time. You know, we've had obviously the big pandemic. And the pandemic has acted as a kind of an amplifier, for stresses and tensions that have existed for many years, maybe even decades. And in a way we can really see how the pandemic because of the way it's impacted the nature of our global system and the systems within it. It's really highlighted those interconnections and the deep seated structural fragilities that you know have existed for some time. But how, you know, a major crisis like this kind of emerges from those structural fragilities, and then further amplifies them, you know, so we know that the pandemic is a, kind of a symptom of some of the core processes of industrial civilization, I think this is something that is now being discussed a bit more, it's still not really entered mainstream consciousness. I mean, there's still this sense of "well this thing came out of the blue," and you know, now we just have a public health crisis, and let's just get a vaccine, and everything will be fine. But obviously, what we're really seeing is that what this happened, because of the way in which our societies are expanding, and encroaching into, you know, natural ecosystems, into wildlife, and obviously, the tightly coupled nature of our global transport systems, all that kind of stuff, which has played a massive role in increasing our vulnerability, which is why people have been warning about the inevitability of a pandemic, this, you know, either in the 20th century, or 21st century, I think, many people were saying, "Look, it's going to happen, it's just a matter of when," and this is why. So on the one hand, we know that it's because of a pre-existing system, which perhaps, you know, some of us are looking at it, and trying to understand it, but perhaps overall, you know, in terms of decision making, and in terms of really kind of people who have that responsibility to drive decisions in our societies, that lack of awareness of these systems and how they're working isn't, has created this vulnerability. And then further, we've seen so many things happen this year, in terms of the continued

risk from climate change, you know, the fact that, you know, we had a respite with carbon dioxide emissions, but they've continued to rise, and they've continued to be in the danger zone, despite that respite. We've seen this year, the massive impact, following the pandemic on the energy system and the oil industry and the massive oil price collapse, collapse, which is unprecedented. But which again, vulnerabilities warned about for many years, and the pandemic acted as kind of like a tipping point, you know, really just pushing all of those things over into an accelerated decline.

**Nafeez Ahmed 07:29**

And we've also had the kind of the, I guess, the political context of this increased polarisation along right and left, and you know, with anti-lockdown scepticism, and as well, as you know, the Black Lives Matter uprisings. And so that has shown how, in this wider context of strained system, you know, one of the first things that happened is, is people are affected, and people will come out on the streets, and they will protest, and there may be civil unrest, and all that kind of stuff. So we have these different domains, I think what we're seeing is that you can look at all of these things separately, and, and understand them, but until you really take a bigger picture and see, well, wait a minute, how are these things actually interconnected? You then, that then allows you to say, "Well, actually, you know, to what extent are these wider risks and processes, part of this wider, this system, which is in this big transition, which is fundamentally about the system's relationship with the earth system." And I think that's often missing. So you know, when you trace it back, that that connection with the earth and the connection with, in a way, you know, taking the Black Lives Matter movement, and then routing it back in this crisis that our civilization is facing with the earth system, causing the, you know, the pandemic in between. For me, that really highlights the complexity of what we're dealing with that there really is something going on here that connects all these things. And so we can see that, you know, systems thinking as a way of being able to really start to join those dots and develop a framework or frameworks for exploring this. But I think in terms of IR, IR, obviously, does offer systems approaches to some extent, but I guess it's the way in which those systems are interpreted, you know, of course, so there's, there's the kind of the orthodox IR theory of the state system, which focuses on the state as the core unit, which, you know, I found particularly frustrating, because what is the constitution of the state? And you know, is it really sufficient to talk about the state as the fundamental unit and national interest and things like that? There's all sorts of problems there and I think what we're seeing is, if you are unable to grasp the complexity of, of a system and not just a system, but to realise that you're dealing with multiple different subsystems, and they all have, and that's the thing is like the level of analysis at that level is not completely false. Of course, there's a state system, of course, there's national interest. But if that's your only level of analysis, you simply won't see how the system is actually operating, you'll miss the, you'll miss the political economy part you'll miss, you'll miss the social relations by which states are embedded in all sorts of you know, there's an economic context and there's also environmental contexts, and you'll miss the way in which all of that is interconnected. And so I think it's a case of saying, it's not, it's not so much about, we throw out, you know, orthodoxy and we become we all become Marxists or something like that, although, I would say I've certainly positioned myself with, with a critical stance on orthodox theory. And I'm certainly more, would situate myself theoretically, as a political Marxist. But having said that, you know, I think the value of systems thinking is being able to see how these approaches do actually provide important insights from a certain lens. But you have to be able to step back and see that it's just a lens. And actually, your theory is a tool, it's just a tool to understand how a certain subsystem is working. And it's really important to be able to step outside of

that lens, and see how those theoretical tools can be used and applied in relation to other theoretical tools and to build up a wider systemic framework to see how it all fits together. So that's, I guess, what I'm trying to do, to some extent, with my academic and journalistic work is, is to move outside of the kind of very polarised ideological divisions that sometimes develop around these things and to say, we know we can still have those positions. And we can have our biases and our worldviews and our sense of what we think really works as an explanatory framework. But we still have to be able to navigate beyond those things and see how things fit together.

**Tom Pogram 12:03**

Yeah, thank you, Nafeez. That was a fantastic sort of crash course in what systems thinking might bring to this conversation. And I know you've probably read Robert Jervis's classic book 'Systems Effect' it came out in 1997. I read it recently, I wonder a little bit why that didn't revolutionise the field. But perhaps it's time to pick it up again. So I mean, to ground that a little more, of course, systems thinking also brings into play the issue of causation, particularly causation in the context of nonlinear change. And as Robert Jervis makes very clear, it's not so much that systems are more than the sum of their parts, it's that systems are actually different to the sum of their parts. And if we sort of make that abstract observation concrete in the light of COVID, you said yourself that even well informed risk analysts have been surprised at how dramatic the impact of the COVID situation has been on infrastructure, on basic state functioning. Of course, we see some states performing pretty well, I've got Taiwan, New Zealand, Norway, but then others really performing, much less well, including those who were apparently best prepared for a pandemic, such as the UK and the US. And I wanted to ask, do you think states are perhaps even maladaptive when it comes to effectively dealing with these kinds of complex systemic global problems? And to maybe make the question even more acute, do states know how to govern chronic problems? So we have approached COVID as kind of an emergency situation, but as you've suggested, the drivers of COVID lie also in much broader systemic shifts, such as deforestation, and environmental degradation. And these aren't problems which are going to be solved necessarily in the, at least in the immediate term. So do states know how to deal with those kinds of chronic possibly insoluble problems that we're just going to have to live with?

**Nafeez Ahmed 14:07**

Yeah, I mean, it is a good question. I mean, I don't really think states, as they're currently structured, are particularly useful vehicles for dealing with most of our challenges as species. Because they actually have created those problems. And I think this is the irony is that we're looking at, you know, existing governmental structures. And, I mean, let's face it, to some extent, they're operating as captured entities for all sorts of interests around the way in which we consume, you know, material goods, and, you know, the kind of over exploitation of fossil fuels and other kinds of mineral resources. And that process has led to the overshooting of these planetary boundaries and it's put us in this situation where we're facing these emergencies. And what interesting about this is that having created this problem, because of the structures that exist, we're incapable of actually really anticipating the scale of the problem, because of the narrow way in which we tend to see things and make decisions. And, of course, again, it, you know, when I'm saying we, you know, sometimes, you know, we can get lost in the royal we. And what I, what I really mean is, you know, it's, it's the specific institutions that we use to make these decisions, whether it's the state, or whether it's political parties, or whether it's even, you know, NGOs, or whether it's international institutions. And of course, I think, I guess, when we go

back, when we're looking at, a lot of the locus of power is around very large, you know, sometimes multinational conglomerates, which have a very kind of powerful influence on the decision making, the political apparatus of the state. And that's, you know, it doesn't really matter where you sit politically, I mean, that's pretty much very well known, we can see it happening all the time. And that's part of the problem is that, that decision making apparatus is not even focused on dealing with problems. The political apparatus is focused on, you know, getting into power every four years, and making sure you have enough money to win your campaigns to do that.

**Nafeez Ahmed** 16:20

And when you, when you're finally in, in, you know, you're there, you know, your, your objectives are so short term, you're about delivering something within the next within four years, so that you can win the next term. You know, it's just so narrow. It's nothing to do with what's actually real and going on in the world in a sense, you know, to some extent, and I think that's the problem we're dealing with is that there's such a disjunction between our institutions and what's actually happening. And I think that's the problem. So in that sense, that broad sense, I think, definitely our states are not fit for purpose. We don't have, in order to deal with these complex issues, we need to have kind of what is what I would call collective intelligence, or I use the term public networked intelligence, which I tried to convey this idea of a sense in which, in which people and publics and communities or nations, whatever you want to call, at whatever level are able to accurately see, you know, perceive their environment, and then be able to organise coherently in response to what's, what's happening. And that obviously, this idea of intelligence and this idea of collective intelligence comes in. And the reason I use public networked intelligence because I want to distinguish between this idea of mechanised collective intelligence, which has become quite a popular idea amongst people in the tech community, decided that you can just apply AI to, you know, the study of various things. And that's going to, you know, machine intelligence will produce understanding of trends and certain things, and that's going to produce the answers and actually, itself, that's obviously a useful tool to have. And I'm sure we can gain a lot from that but it's not going to give us as, as people the ability to actually make decisions, because if you have a machine thing producing loads and loads of things and ideas and information, you still need people to be able to process that, understand it, integrate it into decisions for our lives, in the sense, you know, wisdom, you know, that I think that's what's missing. So the question really is, how do we get to a point where we can do that? And I think, if we're looking at the COVID thing to get to, to answer your question really directly, at the moment, there's a real division between countries in East Asia, for example, which appear to have identified a way of, you know, it's not it's not a perfect solution, but it's a way of saving as many lives and livelihoods as possible, where they've minimised the economic damage. I mean, of course, there's no doubt they're still facing quite serious economic problems, but they've minimised that damage. And they've also minimised the number of deaths compared to what's going on in the US and UK and places like that, where we've had the complete opposite. Had the worst of all worlds, we've had absolute destructive impact on the economy worse than anywhere else, and absolutely destructive impact in terms of the number of deaths and the overwhelming of the healthcare systems. And those have happened at the same time. And it's interesting, that the Anglo American model is a neoliberal model. It's one in which the state, which is already as we've said, is a flawed institution, but it's about in in a sense, you know, contracting the state and...

**Nafeez Ahmed** 19:35

Essentially just, it's really just reducing the role of the state in making decisions about the economy and, and issues of concern to the public, and bringing in, you know, private actors more into that, and in allowing the market to solve things whereas in East Asia, I would say that the role of the state, even though these are still most often capitalist economies, but they still have a much, a more different idea of the role of the collective and the role of the state in which individuals have a greater stake, greater responsibility for each other, a very different role for the idea of the state, the state has, is recognised as having a legitimate role in organising the affairs of the economy to some extent, and that's, you know, not saying that, you know, you need to have jumped into, you know, complete and utter top down central planning or something like that. But I think it's really interesting that, in response to a crisis, those countries have been far more equipped to be able to respond, than, say, the US and UK And that, to me says that what's missing here is that, you know, you need you do need to have some kind of apparatus, which represents the public interest, which is able to organise coherently and to respond coherently to crisis without the influence of vested interest, and so on, and so forth. Once you have an approach, which just elevates the market, and says, you know, laissez-faire, you know, let the market solve everything, you're going to just end up destroying yourself, the market cannot solve complex social and global problems, the market needs to be designed, it needs to be calibrated, it needs to be... Have a structure, you can't just let the market do everything by itself. And I think we're now, we've seen this empirically proven before our eyes, that the market is not going to solve. It's not fit for purpose, it's not going to solve it. So states, which I think, moving to that direction, using the market as their ultimate problem solving tool and leaving everything to that and leaving, you know deregulation, can be rampant deregulation and privatisation, what we've seen is that that's going to head for complete disaster, you need to have human beings in the driver's seat, making decisions and intelligent decisions about what's going on in the world.

**Tom Pigram** 22:04

That's a very important point there. Of course, also, because these actors, in a sense, frame what is salient in the landscape, they frame to use an expensive word, the ontology, how we make sense of these problems, whether we even see the problem in the first place. And I guess that speaks a little bit to this question of why our global biophysical drivers as you put it, of human system destabilisation, so rarely front and centre in foreign policy analysis in the media in the news. And I was thinking, you know, we can argue that market actors, perhaps they're not interested in putting those issues front and centre for public consumption. One of the actors which is seemingly analysing and understanding these dynamics are military actors, we see reports coming out of the Pentagon, out of the Ministry of Defence. So they are representing a particular constituency, and they are concerned it seems with the prospects for you know, biophysical triggers, changes over the next medium to long term, over the century. But it's not just say those actors out there, but also perhaps in the academy, I've noticed there's a resistance among political scientists, historians sometimes to consider the possibility that climate change itself could be a prime mover, affecting the course of history, people like Peter Turchin, who has devised this kind of science, historical science, predictive science. He really thinks that a lot of the drivers of history will be sort of human system drivers inequality among the rich and the poor, the Thomas Piketty kind of model that I think you're suggesting, actually, that we need to take the biophysical drivers much more seriously. There's quite a lot there. Sorry, you might want to unpack that a bit.

**Nafeez Ahmed** 23:59

Yeah, that's, that's a really good point. And I think it's the interaction between the human system and the earth system that is the key issue, which I think a lot of political theory tends to miss. I think most social science theory is focused on, is focused on the human system, which, again, is a totally legitimate area of study. But that's not going to tell you anything about the earth system and it's not going to tell you anything about the relationship between the human system and the earth system. And I think that's the problem with the way in which our academic disciplines have developed, has been in the context of, I think, you know, it's a historically, it's a historically kind of specific circumstance that we've, you know, we happen to have had this transition into a form of science, which tends to, you know, want to take things apart to understand them and I think that's worked really well, in the sense that it's produced all sorts of very important discoveries about the universe, you know, also about, you know, how we work, as you know, as you know, in our biology, it's produced tangible. You know, I mean, like quantum, the quantum physics isn't just about amazing cosmological insights, but it's also given us huge technology. I mean, there's so many technological things in our daily life, which are actually due to our insights into the quantum realm. And you can say the same for medicine, you know, medical development.

**Nafeez Ahmed** 25:33

So there's no doubt that that's, it's worked to some extent. But it's all taken place within this. When you step back again, and we see it's taken place in this context of accelerating kind of growth and consumption, which is now leading us into this crisis state. So we then have to ask ourselves is this really the only way to do this and when we look a little deeper, what we're seeing is that we've got the capacity to take things apart. And it's almost like, you know, we hold a magnifying glass up to things and that, that shows us what's going on at that level. But if we're holding up that magnifying glass and walking around, you know, you're bound to bash into something or hit a wall, you have to be able to step back and see how those things you're looking at, do fit together. And that's what's missing from our scientific approaches across the natural and social sciences, where we've, we've gone into these domains, and we've had this disciplinary specialisation, going deeper and deeper into, you know, I want to understand, you know, I want to understand the natural world, I want to understand biology, I want to understand, you know, political economy, I want to understand, you know, feminism and Gender Studies, I want to understand this, that, that whatever. And all like, again, all those things are completely legitimate areas of study and specialisation. But if that's all we're doing, then how do we connect these up? How do we connect these insights together, we don't have frameworks to do that. And so we've lost that sense of, of, of a holistic whole system approach. And I think that's really the biggest challenge of our time is being able to find ways to bridge that, to build up these whole systems approaches and to realise that what we're dealing with here are these, are these multiple systems, which are legitimate study in their own right, but when we bring them together, we can start to see how things work overall. And when we do that, we're able to see a much bigger picture. And I think that's the problem we've got in academia is that, you know, we've had decades of this going on. And to some extent, we have entrenched structures and institutions and ways of thinking, and there's a certain inertia around that. But also, there is a certain, there is a sense in which so much of our political institutions and economic institutions have become embedded in that way of being, in that way of doing things, that they don't really want to change. And I think the DO - you know that the defence institutions

are a really good example of that, in the sense that, yes, so because they deal with security, and they want to look at long term security trends, and even short term security issues. And they've, they've seen that while there are these biophysical things, and the only reason they're interested in those biophysical drivers, is because it ticks that security box that oh well wait a minute, climate change might actually amplify the risk of warfare. So now, because we need to understand warfare, we need to understand how climate change can amplify that, and it's only from that lens. So it's from that kind of, it's from that narrow, again, slightly ideological sense of assumptions about what we should be doing. And so the results then are skewed as well, you know, when the reports that come out are skewed towards the securitisation of these biophysical issues, rather than actually understanding, you know that the implications of this go far beyond a securitization approach, which would actually make things worse. And I think this really came home to me, I did a story a couple of months ago on the British military had commissioned, I think the RAND Corp to do a study on climate change. And this was going to feed, this is feeding into Britain's whole kind of climate strategy, and specifically the UK military climate strategy. And the RAND report was just like, "Well, basically, temperatures are going to rise by three to four degrees Celsius by 2100. So all these bad things are gonna happen. And that's what we need to plan for." And it was quite astonishing, because it was telling policymakers that this is the scenario that you have to prepare for, because this is basically what's going to happen. Rather than saying, this is one business as usual scenario, which we have to of course plan for and prepare for, but we should, we would urge the government that they can mitigate these security risks by not having a three to four degree Celsius temperature rise. And it's like, this is not this is not rocket science. It's obvious it's like that, that little bit of step from as a military institution we can, we should advise on this is the kind of strategy to avoid these outcomes. What's, what's difficult about making that? Why is that a leap to say that? Why is that going outside the boundaries of what a military institution should do? Why is it perceived that the military should only just say, well, these are the risks, these are the threats, and let's pour more money into preparing for, you know, radicalised crazy meltdowns of society, you know, which is a recipe for absolute disaster, because if all you're doing is preparing for that, meanwhile, you're guaranteeing the continued rise in emissions and all the processes that are driving all this crisis in the first place.

**Nafeez Ahmed** 30:55

So it's this kind of what we're finding is that the existing frameworks of thinking are so self-limiting, that they actually prevent us from responding to what's actually going on. Because we only look at one sphere of it and we respond to that and we tend to make things worse. It's kind of like, the regressive response to Black Lives Matter, for instance, which is, "oh, it's people on the street, civil unrest, let's just get more police out." Well, you're only going to make things worse, because you're looking at this tiny, tiny lens. And it's like, you're not wrong in saying that, yes, there's people on the street. But you're missing the point when you're not looking at why people are in the street as a result of the institutions that put them there. So that's what's missing is this inability to kind of step back and say, wait a minute. And I think that's, that's what worries me. I'm really worried that our current institutions are locked into this frame of thinking. And it's just this, you're kind of doubling down on the assumptions that you've used to have got us into this. And, and you're kind of making that worse. So here in the UK, for instance, with the talk recently about, it came out, I think, couple of weeks ago, that the teaching in schools, you're not allowed to talk about, if you have criticisms of capitalism, this could be considered potentially extremist. And that's not going to be allowed in schools. The teaching of critical race theory

without showing, without acknowledging that there are, it's just a theory and it might be wrong, is not going to be allowed. So this weird radicalization of our education system that's going on. That is saying "Let's push out". I mean, you have masses and masses of peer reviewed scientific studies, which are talking about the problems of capitalism, and not in an ideological way, purely and even in a technocratic way and saying, we need to do this, we need to do that. If someone like George Soros, for example, who is a capitalist has openly spoken about the deep seated problems and weaknesses of capitalism. Why is it that we cannot have frank and open discussions in classrooms about these issues? It's quite astonishing, that that's the way in which things are moving. So there is, there really is a need for people in these positions to step back outside of their ideological kind of, you know, little kind of windows, that they're looking at things to say, "Well, we really do want to make sure that our own children aren't going to get kind of deluged in this, in a terrifying spiral. Then we know, we need to take responsibility for how we're talking about things, how we're thinking about things." And it isn't just about the next time, and I think this is why I always try to urge people in these different institutions to think about is that look, it's really is, it's about your own family. It's about your own networks. It's about all the people around you, and the legacy that you're going to leave. All those people who are around you are going to have to face up to the consequences of those decisions, those making the way you're using those words. So you have to take that responsibility unless you want to see the consequences in your own, in your own context.

**Tom Pegram** 34:16

I think Jess has a question.

**Jessica Knezy** 34:19

Yes, thanks very much, Nafeez. I had a question about your role as an investigative journalist, which leads very well after what you were saying about where we get our information. And I find that a lot of the public consciousness is taken up by sources that are highly partisan, ideologically leaning. And you mentioned earlier that mechanised public information sharing through AI and machine learning is, has its faults, and an inability to put systems together and create connections, that really only human wisdom can do. So in your role as an investigative journalist, how do you speak truth to power in the most effective way? And is investigative journalism a good tool for disseminating and commenting on multifaceted global issues?

**Nafeez Ahmed** 35:19

Yeah, that's a really good question. And I think as an investigative journalist, I guess I went through a bit of a, almost a kind of a midlife crisis at some point when I kind of looked back, and I thought to myself, what has the actual impact of some of my reporting been? I'll give you an example, actually, a very tangible one. What are some of the first, what really what, the first things which threw me into investigative journalism, when I was quite young, was investigations into 9/11. And looking at problems with the 9/11 narrative, and issues around the way in which governments had made decisions around national security, and specifically connections with states that were funding Islamist terrorism. So for example, our relationship with Saudi Arabia, our relationship with states like Pakistan, or Turkey, or Azerbaijan, I guess one of the basic arguments or insights that emerged from that was that the reason that we had so much intelligence blind spots in the run up to the 9/11 attacks, and there were all sorts of warnings coming in and stuff, but they were just ignored. And you know, the National Security

System kind of went into a paralysis is because of these cross cutting institutional relationships that existed and also personal relationships as well, you know, to do with, there's some of the Bush family, and all that kind of stuff, you know, their relationships with the Saudi kingdom, and even members of the Bin Laden family. So all that context was, had this dampening effect on the ability of the national security system to respond. I remember one of the things I used to talk a lot about was this link between our intelligence agencies had this historic link and their use of Islamist groups, for geopolitical purposes, of course, something well known during the Cold War with, you know, the war in Afghanistan, for example, and the funding of the Mujahideen in order to counter Russian power, but also this was something that actually continued after the Cold War, for very much the same kinds of reasons. And it was something that again, you know, as you can imagine, it's not politically correct to talk about these things. It's, it's seen as, are you offering a conspiracy theory, so I didn't want to offer conspiracy. I didn't want to undermine the fact that Islamist extremism is real. But I wanted to draw attention to these wider processes. What I found is that having banged on and on about those kinds of issues. So I was gratified to find that, I mean, this work, you know, influenced, official inquiries. I mean, my book was read by 9/11 commissioners, it became part of you know, that 900 families had actually, one of my books on the first day, I think it was the first they had read, and they'd used it to inform the lines of inquiries, they were asking the US government. So on the one hand, it was gratifying to see all of this impact. But on the other hand, what I found was that people then began taking those I mean, conspiracy theorists were taking my work right from the beginning, and saying, you know, yeah, 9/11 is an inside job, Nafeez has used the word complicity, so that means that the US government is, has perpetrated 9/11 and that kind of thing, and it just turned into this slippery slope. And I watched as these ideas then kind of just become this, this meme of the idea of "Oh, the CIA funds Islam as the CIA funds Islamists," but it just became this really toxic discourse, to the point where, you know, fast forward to a crisis in Syria. And then I found that people were taking these same sorts of ideas. And of course, you know, there was all sorts of, you know, I've done a lot of reporting on the Syria crisis.

#### **Nafeez Ahmed** 39:08

But what happened is that people then began denying us Assadist crimes against people in Syria by saying that, well, there's funding of jihadist groups in Syria by, you know, the US government and so on and so forth. You know, Saudi is putting money into- and of course, Saudi was and is, has been putting money into rebel groups. And there have been Islamist groups and all sorts of totally legitimate, but then that led, that turned into war crimes denialism, and saying that, well, Assad's not actually, you know, that's all fabricated. It just turned into this really strange toxic discourse and very polarised and as and that's an example of what happens when you kind of narrow down on something and take it out of context and you, you know you don't think systemically about these issues. And that, that was for me, a real kind of you know, I had to take, I felt that I even as a journalist was contributing to some of the toxic discourses in Syria as a reporter, and I ended up doing a massive report for the state crime initiative out of Queen Mary's looking at the way in which these narratives had developed and just investigating them, and just really digging deep. And I think that's what I, what I learned from that is that investigative journalism is really important in order to shine a light on things and to and to, to understand how things work, but it has to be done responsibly. And it has to be done in the context of understanding systems. And that's something that as journalists, we really have to take that responsibility seriously. And when we don't take that seriously. There is a danger that it feeds into these polarising narratives, which are being fed by different interest groups. You know, you have the United

States government with its own interest, and you have Russia, and you have China, you have different entities with their different interests. And as a journalist, we don't want our, our, you know, our work to be co-opted by any of these interest groups, really, we want it to be something that the public can take to make informed judgments about what's going on, which are not politicised by these interest groups, and which have value in sense of throwing real light on what's on the plight of what victims are going through. And then we can see the role of all of these groups, you know what are Russia's interests? What are the US government's interests and just what are Saudi's interests? What are China's interests? What are the communities that are struggling on the ground? That kind of thing. You know to really see it in its complexity. And that's what's happening now is that we have investigative journalism, being used as a tool to, to really just suit very narrow political agendas on either the left or the right. And that's very toxic, because it just means that you don't care about what's actually going on in the world. You're not worried about criticism, analysis of your own side, for instance, it's just about proving that you're right, and proving that your position is correct, and the other side is wrong. And that's why I'm very wary of this. And one of the things I hear a lot is people, quote, Noam Chomsky, and they'll say, well, Chomsky said that, that, you know, if you're in the West, then it's, your priority is to focus on the West, and, you know, I'm a great fan of Chomsky, and I love Chomsky's work. And I think what he wasn't trying to say, was that you focus on the West in this absurd myopic way to the point that you erase the crimes of non-Western states. But that you don't allow your criticism of non-Western states to, to basically, you know, kind of elevate the West to this to this level, which is, which is dishonest. I think that's really the point, moral point he was trying to make. And that obviously, if we're situated in the West, then our, you know, we should be concerned about where we can have that immediate sense of impact. But that doesn't mean that we should turn a blind eye when our discourses and our narratives are going to undermine the rights of people in China, for example, like the Uighur minority. I mean, again, the polarisation has gone there, where you've had people on, there are some people on the left who are just absolutely denying there's anything going on with the repression of the Uighur, on the grounds that there are people with vested interests in the United States who are attacking China and have vested interest against China. And it's kind of like, your job as a journalist is to not get caught up in that politics but to see what's going on. There's always going to be vested interests on different sides, whether it's Russia and or China or the United States. Our job is to step outside of that and be able to see, well, actually what's going on, there, it may be that some of the sources, some of the people who are talking about the repression of the Uighur, for example, have vested interests and have biases, but is what they're saying true? You know let's look at the data that they're pointing out and see whether there is corroborated. What about the witness testimony that's coming out is that, you know, is it valid? You know, there's an overwhelming case. So that's just an example to say, you know, it's difficult, but I think that ethos is something that's really important for people to take on. And I think, the more most of us take that on, the more we can hold journalistic institutions to account to ask them to look, can you be more responsible in the way you're doing your reporting?

**Tom Pegram 44:38**

Jess do you have a follow up?

**Jessica Knezy 44:40**

Yes, touched on a number of potent issues. You spoke about journalistic responsibility, and ensuring that the reporting that you're doing isn't necessarily influenced by a partisan agenda, but yet it is

impossible to control where your information goes after it's been shared and who uses it and to what advantage? So what are the steps that you would take I suppose to speak truth to power in a way that is non biased and allows you to maintain your own integrity?

**Nafeez Ahmed** 45:22

Yeah, it's a tough one. I mean, I think you have to be really specific and intentional about the reporting that you're doing. And sometimes that means making really clear, you know, things that you're not going to stand by, or things that you're not saying. But it's not easy. You mean, you can't take responsibility for you know, crazy people doing crazy things with your work, it's not necessarily your fault. But when you do, if you do see that happening, you know, you, you can try to dampen it down. So I think it's about writing well, or reporting well, or making your videos well, you know, and, again, taking really taking a systems approach. And when I talk about systems journalism, I mean my approach is grounded in I guess, the academic work that I've done, and I've always been in, kind of tried to look at, if I'm taking a systems theory background approach, then when I come to understand what's going on in a climate issue, or what's going on, in the food system, or looking at, for example, particular conflict, I will try to apply that systems lens to understand what's really going on there. So I think to some extent, it is about saying, if I, if I'm able to see what's going on, the issue that's going on here, it's not just about evil groups of people or evil entities, it's also about the systems that incubate them, and the processes and decisions that incubate them. And sometimes, it's about drawing that attention. So that's, that's the lesson I want to take away. So for instance, you know, we were talking about the Uighur earlier on. One of the things that I've done, one of the stories I did was about how Huawei, the you know, the big telecoms company in China, that people have spoken about is, you know, having a relationship with various Western companies and all the rest of it. Well, Huawei was essentially built by companies like IBM, and IBM, and other companies like Microsoft and others, played a big role actually, in nurturing the kind of surveillance oriented policies of that company. And even when it became securitized, and it became used by Chinese police and military institutions, that was still going on. In fact, IBM still has this relationship with Huawei, where they give them, I can't remember the exact number, but they give them a quite hefty fee every year. And it's a consultancy fee, and IBM will go and advise them and so on and so forth. And Huawei is known, documented to be directly involved, its technologies directly involved in policing, the Uighur people in this Xinjiang region, and involved in those kind of detention camps, and so on and so forth. So that, when you take that step back, and then you can see, well, how did Huawei actually come into existence and go down this line? And who was advising it? And what were those interests? And how did those interests feed back into kind of the capitalist Western infrastructure, that's, then makes you systemic questions about what's going on. And then you can see that it's not, it isn't just about China and China doing terrible things, and because China's bad, but it's about this wider system, and how we have actually, all of us together, including China, have helped to usher in this system that has taken this very, very toxic, dangerous form in China, which of course, the Chinese state is, you know, fundamentally responsible for. But that doesn't absolve Western institutions of their own responsibility either. And then it allows you to look and say, well, when we have you know the Trump administration railing against China and jumping up and down, and suddenly Trump cares about Muslims in China, then you can step back and say, "Well, actually, you don't really care about Muslims in China, this this is a geopolitical thing for you. And what have you done about the active companies in the United States which have been feeding, to this day, this machine that you are saying is a problem? And are you going to do anything about that?" So it's about allowing, so when you take that wider lens,

and so again I think it's about that ethos, and you have to kind of take that ethos really intentionally and use that to understand what's going on, and then to follow those conclusions and hopefully you can produce stories which are, which are hard hitting and powerful and eye opening, but still very balanced and also give people a sense of what comes next. What are the changes? What are the systems that need to change? What are the things which are actually wrong with our surveillance society, in our culture and our technology? And what can we think about doing differently?

**Tom Pogram 50:21**

Yeah, and surely there's also lots of scope for academics and students to be looking at how these states such as China, and Western states and others are operating or pursuing their interests through these kinds of transnational networks, private governance channels, I don't think there's much scholarship yet on that. Certainly, I think that's a really important domain for us to explore, and to dig into. I know, Zoe's got a question. So I'm gonna hand over to Zoe.

**Zoe Varenne 50:50**

Yeah, so kind of following on from that, in terms of what comes next. And you know, without wishing to fall into the poorly informed, utopian and dystopian views, what would a resilient system look like? And how can we set a course towards a fundamentally fairer and more sustainable and viable human Earth system for the future?

**Nafeez Ahmed 51:10**

So I did a, I've actually just published a report with the Schumacher Institute, where I'm a fellow called 'Deforestation, and the Risk of Collapse', and this report focused a lot on some of the kind of questions that we're talking about, with a big focus on deforestation, but in the context of these wider systems in this bridging of planetary boundaries as the big context for how we got into this pandemic, and how we can try to reduce the risk of future pandemics. So this is something I address in that report in more detail if listeners want to go away and read something. But I think my answer to that would be to draw on, and I mention this idea in the report, about this this concept of ecological civilization, which I think David Korten is an author who is a former Harvard Business School guy, you know, worked for USAID for a long time, you know a very kind of senior official in that and then kind of, you know, had had a wakeup call and was like, "This isn't working," what he knew from seeing the things he was seeing. And he's been calling for this idea of ecological civilization, the idea of a civilization which thrives within planetary boundaries. So I think the first shift that we need is, I call it, I'm calling it a lifeboat economy, this idea of moving away from this laissez-faire economy that just which does things by itself. And moving into this very intentional idea of an economy that works to protect people. I think there really does need to be a fundamental paradigm shift about how we think about what an economy is supposed to do. And to me, I think the pandemic offers an opportunity to do that rethinking and it kind of, because it really has hit home, how if we didn't have government stepping in to create safety nets for people you know for doing things, you know, furlough and all the rest of it here is done, you know, been done quite incompetently, and so on. But I think what we're seeing is the pandemic has forced us into this structural position where, you know, if you let the virus rip, you're going to overwhelm your healthcare systems, you're going to, you know, you end up collapsing your economies in one in one way. And that's been modelled, you know, the collapse in GDP that would take place if you just allowed the pandemic to continue. And if you lock down, of course, you know, if you try and respond, there's

obviously an economic consequence, and there's massive GDP crisis. So whichever way you look at it, and even if you do an in between approach, with East Asia, which in the World Bank's recently said that they're facing a kind of a triple crisis, even though they've got the best of those worlds, you know, they've saved as many lives and lives as they can. But they're still facing that consequence. So I think the pandemic is kind of, I've argued that when you take this wider systems approach, it's almost like a tipping point, we've tipped over into this kind of slightly new shift in the global system, and the economy is being forced to contract, and it will contract no matter what we do. And the question we now have to ask ourselves is, if we're going to face a future of declining GDP for some time, and we're also seeing that, to some extent, the endless growth paradigm that we've been living on all this time has actually escalated these risks of disasters. And so really, what we're seeing is, is that where we need to be going? How can we reduce our material footprint rather than increasing exponentially but actually reduce it but still flourish within planetary boundaries? And is that even possible? I think the good news is that there's so much really sound research that shows that it is possible and there's one study by Julia Steinberger, and a number of other people, she was one author, but she's the person that I know very well, she's an IPCC author, she's an ecological economist out of she was at the University of Leeds, I think she's moved to Switzerland, she's done so much work on this kind of stuff. And her recent study basically showed that you can actually reduce GDP by something like 40%. And still grow your population out to about 10 billion people, and provide a really good quality of life. And they went really into finetuned detail, you know, they were looking at, "Can people wash their clothes?" and transport networks, and "Can there be an IT infrastructure?" and stuff like that. And it was quite exciting, because they showed that you could have all sorts of modern amenities, you know, a strong transport network, a really strong Internet, and all this kind of stuff. You know, enough food to eat, even stuff, like having kind of a really comfortable living temperature 24 hours around the world. So all of this stuff could be sustained at that level, with the shift to renewable energies, and but the right restructuring of wealth, distribution, and so on, and so forth. So we know, it's possible, we know we can do this in the case of getting there. But I think as part of that, we do need to look at those, you know, those kind of very specific things.

### Nafeez Ahmed 56:26

And that's why, you know, I really emphasise the role of deforestation as an important one, a frontline issue that we have to tackle, because even though deforestation perhaps wasn't the trigger point for this pandemic, you know, I think it was mostly these industrial processes and how they concentrated in China with these specific consumption practices with, you know, different types of wildlife in the wet markets, and so on and so forth. There's still some uncertainty around it. But we know from the genetic footprint of the virus that this was a natural virus, most likely, and it came from this kind of practice. So we know that the industrial expansion and the urban expansion is going out of control in the way we're doing things. But all of the studies are saying that if we continue kind of going into our forests, in the way we're doing, especially in the tropical regions, that risk that we've seen in China is just going to escalate in an uncontrolled way. And you know, we're going to increase the probability of these viruses jumping to humans, because of the increased contact. And there was one study, which said that there's something like up to 600,000 kind of unknown viruses circulating amongst wildlife that we don't know. And that study basically said that, even under the, to the current level of carbon emissions in global temperatures under two degrees Celsius, there is, that trajectory of that kind of jumping of those exotic viruses to humans will happen again. And we won't be able to do anything about it, even within that two

degrees thing. So that shows that we're already, we're in this danger zone now. You know, we've entered this kind of age of ecological emergencies and they're intersecting. So tackling deforestation, for me is one of the most important things to do. And I think the only way to do it is to, is to basically have some consistent approach to the commodities which are really driving deforestation. And that is, we really have to clamp down I mean, there's a lot of excessive focus on palm oil. As if palm oil is the fundamental driver of deforestation, it's interesting because palm oil is of course, involved in deforestation, but it's not the biggest driver. It's actually beef consumption and soy together, which are absolutely just a crazy amount. I think it's like a third of deforestation is beef alone and then you add soy and it becomes, you start to approach nearly half. And palm oil, I think it's something like 14, or oil seeds generally about 14% and palm oil is a part of that. So there is this strange mismatch going on in the environment movement and in Policymaking in the EU and elsewhere. Where there's been, and I think it's partly to do with this silo thinking that we have going on, but also I think there's the impact of the European Union, for example, you know, they introduced a ban on palm oil for biodiesel a couple of years ago, which I found odd that they did that but then their beef consumption is rocketing. And they said, this is all about stopping deforestation and at the same time, they're trying to forge trade deals with Brazil. But they won't have anything to do with countries like Malaysia because they're saying, well, this deforestation. It's clear that this is not about deforestation. There's something else going on here. This is kind of this is politics, protectionism, something else, maybe your own biofuel industries you're trying to protect. So there's some kind of strange thing going on there, and I think what we need to do is this extract ourselves from the short term politics of it. And say "Look if we're serious about deforestation, we need to stop deforestation around palm oil, we need to stop deforestation around rapeseed, around sunflower, around soy, around beef. We need to, we need to stop, we need to stop it now." And what really drove this home to me actually was a study I covered a couple of months ago, I think it was in August, published in Nature Scientific reports by two theoretical physicists who just modelled the rate of deforestation. And they said, "if the rate of deforestation continues as it is now, over the next two to four decades, civilization will collapse." And they said, "this is because of the impact of the deforestation on these kind of crucial life support system processes around the carbon cycle and stuff like that." And that that was really kind of really shocking for me. Because obviously, we have lots of other studies, which talk about near term collapse risks, which you know, very uncertain, but you know, their worst case scenarios, so to have something like that, was quite you know from physicists as well, doing this kind of modelling was really sobering.

**Nafeez Ahmed 1:01:16**

So it says to me that, you know, this is kind of the frontline of the crisis. And we need to kind of reduce consumption demand within the West, as well as have more robust approaches within these countries. And I think there is good news here, the good news is that in some, in places like Malaysia, which I'm quite familiar with, because I've been there, and I've spoken to some of the people that they've had a lot more progress with slowing the rate of deforestation. And there was a recent, an observation by Mighty Earth, one of the biggest kind of anti-deforestation NGOs, where they said, if we're able to do what we're doing in places like Malaysia, because of the local certification schemes that they have, it's the first mandatory certification scheme that they have in Malaysia called MSPO. And it's not perfect, far from perfect, and there's still issues there. And they're still deforestation, but it's gone down from something like a million acres per year to less than 250,000 acres per year, which is a dramatic decline. So they're saying, if you can scale that up and use that kind of model, where you've got satellite

technology, you know, warnings from external stakeholders, NGOs, and others, and local government, the government monitoring and enforcing those things locally with the palm oil industry, you can actually have huge changes, let's take that kind of model and use it in the Amazon. But how do we do that we need some kind of a framework to do that. So what I've been saying is, instead of saying, okay, the trade, you know, we've been working, trying to have trade deals with Brazil, go in there with ecological restoration as your fundamental baseline principle, underlying your approach to trade. So again, it's not gonna work. If you don't have that shift in mindset, once you realise that you need that lifeboat economy approach, and restoring your ecosystems is the only way you're going to secure that make that the foundation of your trade deals, when you're negotiating with Brazil, you have a no nonsense approach where you're saying, and countries like Malaysia or other producers, saying that, "Look, we're happy to trade with you, we're happy to give you access to our market. But it's only going to be on this on this condition where we have to have sustainable production." But and also apply those kinds of standards consistently to yourself. So producers in Europe and the West are also adhering to these standards, I think there needs to be this really radical shift in the way we're thinking about things to, to what we think is possible. And I think in a way the pandemic has, it has opened up this possibility to do some of these things, which maybe a few years ago, we would have said, that's just not going to be politically possible. Whereas now, I think, actually, we can think outside the box and we can make these seemingly semi utopian ideas, we can bring them into the political domain and say, "Well, actually, let's do this, we can this is the time when we can achieve a dramatic shift." And that I think, can be the grounding for saying "Now that we're moving to that approach. Let's create a whole new economic infrastructure where we share ecological goods and services." You know where Europe can say "We're innovating with a green New Deal, we're throwing so much money into renewable infrastructure. This is our IP, we can make this available to you," and so on and so forth, so we're transitioning much more rapidly towards this clean energy infrastructure and are beginning to move into a slightly more resilient system.

**Tom Pogram 1:04:58**

I think it's really helpful to get into the nitty gritty of these specific policies as you're doing Nafeez and other colleagues, academics, journalists, practitioners, and to prioritise and to break it down. And a lot of people, I think, do feel very overwhelmed by climate change. We think of sort of Timothy Morton's idea of the hyper object. So how do we make, how do we make these problems, kind of micro issues to tackle? I think that's a great example. So I am conscious of your time, I want to say thanks so much for taking on all of these incredibly big challenging questions and providing such clarity. It's been really helpful. To end perhaps, as you've said, you know, we are now in possibly a danger zone, many argue that this is a crucial decade for action, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, of course. What would you say to any of our students who are watching or listening and wondering, what can they do? What can we do as individuals now? How, how do we play our part in trying to shift systems in the direction of ecological civilization?

**Nafeez Ahmed 1:06:10**

Yeah, I mean, I get asked that a lot. I think my main and it's something I grappled with myself, you know, is, you know, "What can I do as an individual?" I think the first step is to realise that you're not gonna, as an individual be able to change the world, you know, there's going to be all sorts of things you're looking at, and you're, you're not gonna be able to change those things. But you can start with

your own context. And I think the first step is, I think what we're looking at when we're looking at these kinds of, the system change that we need is we're looking at a process where individuals are scaling the ability to, to see and think holistically, enacting that in their contexts. Using that in, for example, where you work where you study, where you play, your family, your friends, networks, that's your arena of immediate action and change. And when you can begin to scale that systems awareness within that context. And your task in that sense, is to simply act as like a domino effect. So that other people then around you can take on the same, begin to take on the same kind of holistic thinking, and, again, keep spreading it. And eventually, at some point, as students, you'll find that your arena of action will be different, you know, you'll be able to do a lot more activism, you'll be able to engage in different societies, you'll be able to do different kinds of campaigns, and you want to bring that sense of whole systems approach into the way you do those things. But then you're paving the way to get yourself into a position where, you know, hopefully, you will be you know, you have secure livelihood, or secure kind of pathway. And wherever you're going in that direction, you want to be able to take that capacity to now think systemically and act systemically into your organisation into where you're going to go. And again, to keep scaling that. And I think that's the key, I think the big insight that I had was realising that it's, of course, you know, we want to keep engaging with government, we want to keep doing our political campaigning, we want to keep being in the room with these people, and doing all that kind of stuff. And also being on the outside and being on the streets. And, you know, doing Extinction Rebellion, and that kind of protest, you need all of that kind of stuff. But really fundamentally, what's going to shift this is more and more people in these different institutions themselves, being able to actually see what's going on and be able to realise, "Well, now that I can see the system, this is the kind of action that I can change, whether I'm a politician, whether I'm head of an energy company, whether I'm a banker, whether I'm working in policy," to be able to see systemically, and then take that action in that context. And I think that's the key is, is being able to scale that process of systemic change. So when you realise that actually you have a huge amount of power in that sense, as an individual, to focus on upgrading yourself, as someone who's able to see and think in systems and, and then scale that process around you, where the most immediate forms of action are available to you. That's really, really critical. And that's how we're going to create change. And that's how I think we're going to be able to do this.

**Tom Pogram 1:09:31**

I suppose we as academics can play our part by ensuring that it's on the syllabus systems thinking. Well, thank you so much Nafeez. It's been really great. You know, we wish you the very best in your work. We'll be following it and hopefully post COVID we might be able to get you into UCL for an event at some point.

**Nafeez Ahmed 1:09:50**

I'd love that thanks so much guys.

**Tom Pogram 1:09:52**

Thank you. Thanks for tuning into 'Imperfect Utopias', to get access to all of our content, and to stay up to date with future zoom calls, workshops, and events and more, check us out [ucl.ac.uk/global-governance](https://ucl.ac.uk/global-governance). If you like this content, please do leave us a comment and subscribe. Until next time!