

Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault: Preface to the German edition 2008

The debate between Noam Chomsky, 1928, and Michel Foucault, 1926-1984, is unique for more than one reason. Both philosophers are original; consistent in their reasoning, sharing a profound interest in philosophical questions; scholars in linguistics, humanities and sciences, and above all, endowed with a lifelong passion for politics.

I met both men in 1970. As I waited in Chomsky's room, I became increasingly intrigued by him. I was surrounded by a life-size picture of Fidel Castro, his head bowed and his hands in his pockets; a picture of Fred Hampton (1948-69), the assassinated Black Panther; a folder from Agitprop in London, an information and communication service for the Left; and cartons of books on the floor and on the table, the titles ranging from biology, chemistry, literature (Updike) and philosophy (Quine) to Free Press and Mouton editions. There was one picture that dominated everything else: Bertrand Russell.

When I told Chomsky how depressed I had been by his essays in *American Power and the New Mandarins* because of the insight they gave into the political, moral and economic plight of the Western world, he reacted, saying that I was the first person to tell him so, but that he felt the same. He still devotes most of his time to politics, which is quite something for a man who has achieved a revolution in linguistics that may be comparable to those of Newton and Einstein in physics.

During my last visit, December 7 2007, the atmosphere in his room in the new building of M.I.T., designed by Frank Gehry, felt different. But Russell was still there. Goethe would call such a relation between Russell and Chomsky "seelische Wahlverwantschaft".

From reading Foucault I knew that I had to be on time, and I mean: exactly on time. However, I was delayed by the absence of names on the doors of French apartment houses. When I apologised for arriving five minutes late, he said it was a pity: there were only 25 minutes left. He had planned on exactly half an hour, although it finally became one hour.

Foucault's reaction is fairly characteristic of one aspect of his personality. His style conjures images of a general of the Ming dynasty or a Count Dracula. He likes to reject any expression of emotion. In reply to my attempt to obtain more biographical information for his film portrait, he wrote by hand the following letter:

Sir,

I don't wish that in a television broadcast, which you want to dedicate to me, space should be given to biographical data. I consider, indeed, that they are without importance for the subject dealt with.

Sincerely yours,

Michel Foucault

He was deeply convinced that all forms of modern subjectivity, as manifested in existentialism and humanism, rest on illusion and self-deceit. When a man excludes his personal life so drastically from his philosophy, a closer scrutiny of that relationship becomes necessary.

His philosophy in those years demanded, or at least justified, his golden, cold thesis that his personal life did not exist. Foucault's ambivalence towards himself and his cultural environment resembles that of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's statement, "we are tired of the man", reaches in Foucault at times the limit of self-destruction, as became clear in our interview:

“I do not say things because I think them; I say them rather with the aim of self-destruction, so that I will not have to think any more, so that I can be certain that from now on, they will lead a life outside me, or die the death, in which I will not have to recognize myself.”

When one compares this statement with Foucault’s theory about the ‘grille’ or ‘episteme’, which dominates specific periods of history, it becomes clear that there is a close connection between the so-called absence of personal life and Foucault’s philosophy of history. But there is another Foucault who does not want to meet his colleagues in Amsterdam after eight o’clock in the evening, but only people under thirty years old. As a guest at a philosophy congress, he can listen by day to lectures which he esteems fairly boring, lectures that deal with the difference between such sentences as “the window is open” and “open the window”, to meet the younger generations during two long evenings in the Milky Way, a centre for underground culture. These were the days in which we had to make his film profile. Foucault and I were sitting in a café in the old Centre of Amsterdam one Saturday late morning, and although we had previously made an appointment to leave by private plane to an island, Foucault did not want to do the profile at all that day. I tried to convince him of the necessity that we should shoot the film, knowing that a cab and a plane were waiting for us. He did not react at all to my remarks. I became more and more worried, wishing that I hadn’t involved myself in the whole project just as Foucault was probably cursing himself for having promised to take part when he clearly disliked doing so. I felt humiliated. Deciding not to talk anymore, I began to read in front of him his *History of Madness*. The result was a Beckett play: two men sitting at a table, not speaking, while one reads a book, written by the other. Outside a cab and plane are waiting. They had to wait for three-quarters of an hour.

Although Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault share the desire to uncover the deeper layers of thinking and a lifelong political commitment, there are irreconcilable differences between them. At the end of the debate Foucault expressed his amazement that “finally, this problem of human nature, when put simply in theoretical terms, hasn’t led to an argument between us; ultimately we understand each other very well as far as these theoretical problems are concerned. On the other hand, when we discussed the problem of human nature and political problems, then differences arose between us”. But Foucault deceives himself. Even at the theoretical level they are opposed to each other.

The philosophy of Noam Chomsky departs from the guiding idea that each human, wherever born, on whatever culture, class or race, is born in the possession of what he calls an innate, mental structure. This mental structure is part of the bio-genetic capacities of the child. It enables the young kid to learn in a quick and creative manner the language of his environment, potentially every language. *This innate mental structure is not only creative but also the carrier of compassion, and of the intuitive insight what justice and un-justice really are.*

In my recent TV-interview * with Noam Chomsky, I posed again the question about *human nature* and *justice versus power* as in the debate between him and Foucault, stating that Foucault starts from a radical behaviouristic point of view of an empty mind. And from this perspective follows for him that whatever we do and think has been conditioned by education and so on. Chomsky’s answer is straightforward: “If the human mind is empty, nothing can develop. If there is no genetic endowment at all to an organism, whatever experience may be there is going to be a pile of mud...it will have no structure, no capacities. So we are left with the question what is intrinsic human nature. We can’t deny its existence coherently any more than you can deny a bees inherent nature coherently...so we’re left solely with the question what it is.”

The questions and answers in the debate between Chomsky and Foucault touch the foundations of Western culture and politics. It is therefore not surprising that the debate has been published again in 2006 by the New Press in New York and by Katz in Buenos Aires, or that the *Chomsky* edition by L'Herne, Paris 2007, quotes the last part of the debate about democracy and justice.

I am delighted that the German edition by Orange Press makes the debate accessible for a German audience. The reading of it will undoubtedly contribute to reflections and discussions about European and American culture, democracy and politics.

Fons Elders

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