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REVIEW

Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *Human Nature: Justice vs Power. The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*, edited by Fons Elders (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-1-595-58134-1

This small booklet is a transcript (and in the case of Foucault, a translation) of what was said in a Dutch television program recorded in 1971, today allegedly accessible at You Tube. The editor Fons Elders is the original organizer of the program. He was thus part of the conversation just as the audience was allowed to pose a few questions. Elders first published these transcripts in 1974 under the title *Reflexive Waters: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, and first one could thus ask: Is it worth publishing them again? Yes, definitely. Does it reveal anything fundamentally new and surprising about Foucault or Chomsky? No, not really, but the confrontation between them brings forth certain traits of their respective ways of thinking that may be worth a little extra scrutiny. The text consists of Elders' introduction (iii-ix) and the transcript, which has two main parts. The first part of the conversation is about the question of human nature, knowledge, and science (1-42), the second is on politics (42-82), and it is especially the second part I find interesting, both in relation to Foucault and in more general philosophical terms. I will thus focus on two points, namely how they relate to politics, and which implication this has for their relation to anarchism.

Still, first must come first, and being introduced by Elders to the question of human nature, Chomsky presents his basic idea about linguistics. In order to account for the ability of a child to learn the structure and order of a language from a very limited small number of examples, one has to assume that the child has some innate capacity for language, and this means that we must claim something about human nature. (4-5) Foucault of course answers that he only considers the notion of human nature an "epistemological indicator" (7), of which there have been several in the history of the human sciences, but this does not spark any conflict. Chomsky politely repeats his point in various ways; some reflecting a realist physicalism describing nature in terms of biology (8), others more in line with the perspective of Foucault, and both try to accommodate the other. Along the way they both accept to clarify various concepts, first of all, that of 'creativity.' For Chomsky this is the basic quality of "any child" (23), whereas for Foucault this is the extraordinary quality ascribed to great scientists, which makes the idea of the subject so important. (20)

Both are thus brought to reflecting upon their own position and that of their opponent, and it is Foucault, who politely offers a consoling perspective, namely how to deal with the "dilemma of the [...] subject." (20) In the history of linguistics, the structural component of

language has for a long time been acknowledged as crucial, and therefore it is important for Chomsky to emphasize the contribution of the individual. (20-22) For Chomsky the emphasis is thus on the “schematism” of the “mind.” (27) Quite the opposite is the case in the history of science according to Foucault. Here the subject has been assumed to be the inventor of truth, the one who has to discover knowledge in spite of the structures, which have been denounced as tradition, prejudice, and “myth.” (21) Therefore it has been important for Foucault to emphasize the positive and productive aspect of the structural component of knowledge. This suggestion naturally brings forth a contrast on the understanding of this history, where Chomsky is the proponent of the idea of growth and progress in science, where Foucault of course thinks in terms of “transformation,” (31) but no conflict evolves.

What we are told in this first part is not surprising, if one has even the most basic knowledge of the two parties. This is the Foucault of *Le mots et les choses*, *L'archéologie du savoir* and *L'ordre du discours*, just as it is the Chomsky of generative grammar. Even though there are lots of possibilities of strife, which could have been developed, the conversation continues to be intellectually sober and stimulating, disclosing the civilized academic manners of both. This changes in the second part, when the discussion is carried into politics.

As an introduction Elders mentions that Foucault told him that he was more interested in politics than philosophy, and with this Foucault complies. (43-45) Then Chomsky is introduced as a proponent of anarcho-syndicalism or libertarian socialism, and this is also accepted. (45-47) What I find interesting here is precisely the question of what should be understood by the two central concerns here, i.e., politics and anarchism. The first since this is where the disagreement becomes most pronounced, the second because of an argument made years ago by Todd May, namely that what we now often call post-structuralism—May's examples being Deleuze, Lyotard, and Foucault—must in politics be understood as anarchism. In particular, just like classical anarchists, Foucault can be quoted to aim at not just an analysis and a critique of power, but also at the destruction and turnover of the very mechanism of power.¹ This should therefore also concern scholars of Foucault. Before going further into these questions, however, we must take a closer look at what actually happens in the second half of the conversation.

Chomsky makes the transition from his scientific and conceptual ideas about the innate capacities of human beings to his political anarcho-syndicalism very easily. The argument is that the creativity of human nature demands the possibility for free creation. Indeed, a “decent society should maximize the possibilities” for such activities. (45) To this is added a philosophy of history of a kind that can be traced back to classical 19th century anarchists like Pjotr Kropotkin,² namely that history has progressed to a point, where “there is no longer” any reason for treating human beings as just “mechanical elements in the productive process.” (46)³ Foucault does not explicitly oppose this, but when asked by Elders about contemporary western democracy, he takes the opportunity to state that we live under a “regime of a dicta-

¹ Cf. Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 14.

² Cf. e.g. Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* [1892/1913] (London: Penguin, 1972), 63 ff.

³ This idea that treating human being mechanically is a distinguishing mark of the historical past one can also meet in the writings of other 19th century thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim.

torship of class" (47) and thereafter sketches his program of the critique of power. As is well known, power is taken to manifest itself not merely in contemporary class society and in the apparatus of the state, but also in the family, in institutions of learning and caring, just as in science and systems of knowledge in themselves. (48-49)

To this, Chomsky rejoins and adds the power of financial institutions and multinational corporations. He enthusiastically emphasizes the need to combat all "institutions of oppression and coercion and autocratic rule" that appear to be neutral, especially those stemming from the "domination of market forces in an inegalitarian society." (50) Chomsky then recognizes the importance of trying to elucidate conceptually the "connection" between an idea of "human nature" and a "social structure", which makes it possible to live a "meaningful human life." (51) This is where the real conflict starts. Foucault thus asks whether one does not risk accepting a concept of human nature as both "real and ideal", which has been constructed in "terms [...] borrowed from our society?" His claim is that in Soviet Union and affiliated societies, the idea of human nature has been the "bourgeois model," (52) and this should make us cautious.

Chomsky answers that of course there is always uncertainty, and that certainly our concept of human nature is limited. However, we must be "bold enough to speculate and create social theories on the basis of partial knowledge", just as we have to act politically without knowing all of the consequences. Thus Chomsky recognizes that civil disobedience, as for instance in the popular resistance against the war in Vietnam, might lead to civil unrest and the dissolution of society, but in some cases one simply has to "prevent the illegal acts of the state." (55)

Foucault then asks for Chomsky's reason for defying the legality of the state, i.e. whether it is in the name of justice or it is "essential for the proletariat in their struggle against the ruling class?" (56) It is obviously a point of importance for Foucault, since he asks very bluntly "Do you refer to ideal justice? That's my problem." (58) And later this is followed up by questions concerning whether it is in the name of "purer justice" that Chomsky criticizes "the functioning of justice." To make the case clear, Foucault states that rather than thinking "social struggle in terms of 'justice'", one should think "justice in terms of the social struggle." (60)

Chomsky tries to answer in various ways that one should always be able to justify one's actions, when engaging in political struggle. Apparently he tries to find a common ground with Foucault by saying that it might be enough with a more modest idea of a "better legality" or a "better justice", since there is some justice in the existing legality. Even though they are not identical, they are not "entirely distinct either." (61) But this recognition probably makes things even worse. Foucault now insists that the proletariat simply wages its war against the dominating class, because "it wants to take power," and he even turns this claim into a general point. As he puts it: "One makes war to win, not because it is just!" (62)

This prompts Chomsky's first express disagreement (62), and he continues to insist on the need for justification. When Foucault claims that what "the proletariat will achieve" by taking over power is "the suppression of the power of class in general," Chomsky understands this as a normative "justification." (65) Foucault, however, refuses that this is the case. Instead he radicalizes his point and insists that "the idea of justice" is "invented and put to

work” as “an instrument of a certain political and economic power,” that it functions “within a society of classes,” (66) and that in a classless society, therefore maybe no such a concept will be of use.

Chomsky expresses that he must “really disagree” with this. As he puts it, he does not believe that “any future society” can be a “perfect society.” (67) One will therefore still need such a concept of justice, since to enter the “struggle”, one “can and *must* give an argument,” and this must be in terms of justice and the realization of human needs, not just “putting some other group into power.” (68) Here obviously, the conversation has been deranged to an extent that the dialogue has ended. What started as small tensions between very different ways of thinking has now apparently turned into a serious political disagreement, and Foucault signals this by asking how much time he has to answer Chomsky. When Elders only want to give him two minutes, he protests and refuse to answer in “so little time.” (69) Instead Foucault develops his earlier claim about notions like those of justice and human nature a little further, stating that they “form part of our class system” and therefore they cannot “describe or justify a fight,” which “shall” “overthrow the very fundamentals of our society.” (70) Thus the conversation ends, although the program and the text continue for ten more pages. Elders tries to get Foucault involved on the concept of madness, but Foucault refuses to use the classifications of our existing society, and the rest of the time he remains silent and lets Chomsky answer questions from the audience.

To me this development indicates some interesting weaknesses in Foucault’s thought from those years. Although he expresses a preference of politics over philosophy (43), he nevertheless juxtaposes describing with justifying—i.e. scientific explanation with political argument—whereby he eschews the normal logic of normative arguments in practical reasoning. Chomsky’s position is very simple, namely that in politics one should justify one’s critique as well as one’s actions. Actually, Charles Taylor has made an argument on a similar basis in his analysis of Foucault’s books on *Surveiller et punir* and *Volonté de savoir*.⁴ Instead of answering, however, Foucault here apparently makes an empirical claim in the spirit of critique of ideology, namely how and why the idea of justice was invented. He thus slides between a description of how things are presently in a sociological perspective, namely that power also rules among the proletarians no matter their proclaimed idealism, and a utopian idea of how history might end, when the proletariat has succeeded with their fight, namely that by that time the very mechanism of power may have disappeared.

Foucault and Chomsky’s understandings of politics appear to be completely different, and this is also interesting in a general, philosophical perspective. Politics can thus philosophically be taken to comprise both the critique of existing ideology and the positive argument for ideals to justify such a critique, and they do not always go well together. For Foucault, politics is tied to the empirical claim that power dominates in institutions of contemporary society, plus a philosophy of history, which ends in a classless society. Although Foucault himself does not ascribe to this end of history as a normative ideal, apparently he still thinks politically in relation to it. He is therefore torn between an analysis of real society as permeated by power relations, and the utopian idea of the ideal society, where no such relations exists. Chomsky

⁴ Cf. Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” *Political Theory*, vol. 12, no. 2, (May 1984), 175 ff.

agrees partly with the empirical claim, but takes for granted that there has been and still can be progress in humanity. He recognizes that the existing juridical systems do in fact contain some elements of justice, and therefore he assumes that arguments in the form of practical reasoning can actually make a difference in the power struggle of real politics. It is precisely this assumption that Foucault will not accept.

Foucault refers to Nietzsche to back up his claim about the invention of the concept of justice. (66) Such an interpretation of Nietzsche, however, is not uncontroversial. A very influential interpretation would claim that what Nietzsche is talking about, is poetics, i.e., neither history nor social science or politics. The idea is to create stories that will show how things could be thought of in different ways. This will in turn serve to liberate the mind from inherited orthodoxies, to become innovative and creative. Nietzsche's genealogy thus does not claim that the dominating classes *in fact* did invent the concept of justice as instrumental in the pursuit of power. He simply tells us stories that reveal to us that there *might* be cases, where justice is a cover-up for the pursuit or exercise of power. Nietzsche's aim is thus to liberate the vital energies of man in order to make us creative as supermen.

There is nothing in this context to suggest that Foucault thinks of Nietzsche in this way. What is at stake for him here is apparently to give added substance to the empirical claim about the invention and instrumental use of the concept of justice in order to reveal it as an inherently ideological concept. Of course it could be claimed that Foucault is simply telling stories in the same way as Nietzsche, and Foucault has actually put forward such claims in other interviews. The point would then be that such stories could only work as intended, if they pretend to be empirical claims. This, however, would mean that somewhere along the way in the conversation Foucault has given up on the very idea of a serious dialogue between Chomsky and himself. Since Chomsky constantly makes truth claims at both the conceptual and the empirical levels, Foucault would thus silently at some point have started to make a mockery of Chomsky, ridiculing him without letting him know. So, either Foucault is honestly trying to use Nietzsche to back up his empirical claim, which is not a very convincing position, or he has given up the dialogue and is simply provoking Chomsky by radicalizing his own stance beyond credibility in an effort to make a poetic—i.e. a pragmatic or perlocutionary—point.

My suspicion is, however, that Foucault—at this time, at least—was not really clear on this point. Nevertheless, either way Foucault does not answer the challenge posed by Chomsky about the need for justifications in politics. To put it simply: For Foucault, politics thus refers to an analysis of power, which claims to be critical, but which refuses to adhere to any ideal standards or ends for the critique in question. For Chomsky, politics is critique and action, and they must both be justified practically in relation to standards and visions. Chomsky's understanding of politics leads him to anarchism in the tradition stemming from the working class movement, but what about Foucault? According to May, he is also an anarchist, but clearly that must be in some other sense.

The dividing point is, I think, precisely the reference to Nietzsche. To explain what I mean by this you must excuse me for making a whole range of relatively unsubstantiated

claims.⁵ For political anarchism in the working class tradition, the antiauthoritarian attitude of Nietzsche is provocative, since it expresses the conscious stance of the master, who is beyond good and evil, simply expressing and expecting to have fulfilled his desires. For such a master, any civilization will be experienced aesthetically as a burden, and it thus rules out the idea of a perfect society. As one of the few classical, working class anarchist Emma Goldman actually defended Nietzsche, and for that she was severely criticized by her anarchist comrades.

Working class anarchists like Kropotkin typically argue that human nature as such does not need a powerful state to counter its wrongs and vices. The vices experienced today are caused by the deception of religion, the domination of the state and the exploitation of capitalism. If these institutions were gone, human nature could in principle flourish to the point, where there would be no need for any substitutions. We could thus in principle live peacefully together: each according to his or her capacity, each according to his or her needs. Such anarchists are thus typically very moral rationalists, who believe in—or at least insist on—the potentials of enlightening popular reason beyond what most people would consider credible or reasonable. In other words, they are often considered naïve. This is the kind of political anarchism that Chomsky would insist on, and today it is very difficult to find any treatment of it in serious English language philosophy textbooks or companions on political philosophy.⁶

What does May then mean by identifying post-structuralism with anarchism? Well, there is a strand of anarchism, which is much more individualistic, moral, and defensive, classically expressed by Henry Thoreau for instance. Here the distaste for the power of the state is so strong that one withdraws from people altogether and instead chooses to enjoy the pleasure of living in the midst of unspoiled nature. Anarchism in this sense is more in line with Nietzsche's refusal to accept the burdens of civilization, and this stand can in turn be strengthened by an analysis of society in terms of power so pervasive that there is really no escape, as long as one stays within society. This is where Foucault comes in. For May, post-structural thinking offers a political alternative to the traditional leftwing politics with its offensive optimism and strategic thinking. May thus argues that post-structural anarchism is defensive, micro-political, and tactical, and to backup this claim he quotes Foucault saying that his analysis of power can only justify a "pessimist activism."⁷

The anarchism that May ascribes to Foucault *et al.* is thus very different from the anarchism that Chomsky himself subscribes to, and one often expresses this by distinguishing between a political or social anarchism and a philosophical, aesthetic, or poetic anarchism. Where the first criticizes domination of various institutions in order to recapture popular sovereignty, for the latter the critique of power express an aesthetic distaste of social and political power so strong that they do not even want to acquire such power themselves. Instead they tend withdraw from political action to other and sometimes more private aspects of human

⁵ In the postscript of my recently published studies in the thinking of Georges Bataille I deal extensively with the question of anarchism, including May's claims (cf. A. Sørensen, *I lyset af Bataille. Politisk filosofiske studier* (Copenhagen: Politisk Revy, 2012), 401-466).

⁶ The best I can offer as reference in the perspective, I want to present here, is a very clear presentation in Spanish by José Alvarez Junco, "La teoría política del anarquismo," in Fernando Vallespín (ed.), *Historia de la teoría política*, 4 (Madrid: Alianza, 1995), 262-305.

⁷ Foucault in May, 98.

life, and in this sense anarchism becomes very similar to *laissez faire* liberalism. Beneath—or beside—the very apparent conflicts on human nature, science, and politics there are thus plenty of other layers of conflicts in this conversation, which are worth looking into, both in relation to Foucault and in a general philosophical perspective. There is therefore every reason to spend a few hours on this small booklet. The introduction of Elders, however, may be skipped without any loss.

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