

# Human Nature: Justice versus Power

Noam Chomsky debates with Michel Foucault

Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault

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## **ELDERS:**

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the third debate of the International Philosophers' Project. Tonight's debaters are Mr. Michel Foucault, of the College de France, and Mr. Noam Chomsky, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Both philosophers have points in common and points of difference. Perhaps the best way to compare both philosophers would be to see them as tunnellers through a mountain working at opposite sides of the same mountain with different tools, without even knowing if they are working in each other's direction.

But both are doing their jobs with quite new ideas, digging as profoundly as possible with an equal commitment in philosophy as in politics: enough reasons, it seems to me for us to expect a fascinating debate about philosophy and about politics.

I intend, therefore, not to lose any time and to start off with a central, perennial question: the question of human nature.

All studies of man, from history to linguistics and psychology, are faced with the question of whether, in the last instance, we are the product of all kinds of external factors, or if, in spite of our differences, we have something we could call a common human nature, by which we can recognise each other as human beings.

So my first question is to you Mr. Chomsky, because you often employ the concept of human nature, in which connection you even use terms like "innate ideas" and "innate structures". Which arguments can you derive from linguistics to give such a central position to this concept of human nature?

## **CHOMSKY:**

Well, let me begin in a slightly technical way.

A person who is interested in studying languages is faced with a very definite empirical problem. He's faced with an organism, a mature, let's say adult, speaker, who has somehow acquired an amazing range of abilities, which enable him in particular to say what he means, to understand what people say to him, to do this in a fashion that I think is proper to call highly creative ... that is, much of what a person says in his normal intercourse with others is novel, much of what you hear is new, it doesn't bear any close resemblance to anything in your experience; it's not random novel behaviour, clearly, it's behaviour which is in some sense which is very hard

to characterise, appropriate to situations. And in fact it has many of the characteristics of what I think might very well be called creativity.

Now, the person who has acquired this intricate and highly articulated and organised collection of abilities—the collection of abilities that we call knowing a language—has been exposed to a certain experience; he has been presented in the course of his lifetime with a certain amount of data, of direct experience with a language.

We can investigate the data that's available to this person; having done so, in principle, we're faced with a reasonably clear and well-delineated scientific problem, namely that of accounting for the gap between the really quite small quantity of data, small and rather degenerate in quality, that's presented to the child, and the very highly articulated, highly systematic, profoundly organised resulting knowledge that he somehow derives from these data.

Furthermore we notice that varying individuals with very varied experience in a particular language nevertheless arrive at systems which are very much congruent to one another. The systems that two speakers of English arrive at on the basis of their very different experiences are congruent in the sense that, over an overwhelming range, what one of them says, the other can understand.

Furthermore, even more remarkable, we notice that in a wide range of languages, in fact all that have been studied seriously, there are remarkable limitations on the kind of systems that emerge from the very different kinds of experiences to which people are exposed.

There is only one possible explanation, which I have to give in a rather schematic fashion, for this remarkable phenomenon, namely the assumption that the individual himself contributes a good deal, an overwhelming part in fact, of the general schematic structure and perhaps even of the specific content of the knowledge that he ultimately derives from this very scattered and limited experience.

A person who knows a language has acquired that knowledge because he approached the learning experience with a very explicit and detailed schematism that tells him what kind of language it is that he is being exposed to. That is, to put it rather loosely: the child must begin with the knowledge, certainly not with the knowledge that he's hearing English or Dutch or French or something else, but he does start with the knowledge that he's hearing a human language of a very narrow and explicit type, that permits a very small range of variation. And it is because he begins with that highly organised and very restrictive schematism, that he is able to make the huge leap from scattered and degenerate data to highly organised knowledge. And furthermore I should add that we can go a certain distance, I think a rather long distance, towards presenting the properties of this system of knowledge, that I would call innate language or instinctive knowledge, that the child brings to language learning; and also we can go a long way towards describing the system that is mentally represented when he has acquired this knowledge.

I would claim then that this instinctive knowledge, if you like, this schematism that makes it possible to derive complex and intricate knowledge on the basis of very partial data, is one fundamental constituent of human nature. In this case I think a fundamental constituent because of the role that language plays, not merely in communication, but also in expression of thought and interaction between persons; and I assume that in other domains of human intelligence, in other domains of human cognition and behaviour, something of the same sort must be true.

Well, this collection, this mass of schematisms, innate organising principles, which guides our social and intellectual and individual behaviour, that's what I mean to refer to by the concept of human nature.

**ELDERS:**

Well, Mr. Foucault, when I think of your books like *The History of Madness and Words and Objects*, I get the impression that you are working on a completely different level and with a totally opposite aim and goal; when I think of the word schematism in relation to human nature, I suppose you are trying to elaborate several periods with several schematisms. What do you say to this?

**FOUCAULT:**

Well, if you don't mind I will answer in French, because my English is so poor that I would be ashamed of answering in English.

It is true that I mistrust the notion of human nature a little, and for the following reason: I believe that of the concepts or notions which a science can use, not all have the same degree of elaboration, and that in general they have neither the same function nor the same type of possible use in scientific discourse. Let's take the example of biology. You will find concepts with a classifying function, concepts with a differentiating function, and concepts with an analytical function: some of them enable us to characterise objects, for example that of "tissue"; others to isolate elements, like that of "hereditary feature"; others to fix relations, such as that of "reflex". There are at the same time elements which play a role in the discourse and in the internal rules of the reasoning practice. But there also exist "peripheral" notions, those by which scientific practice designates itself, differentiates itself in relation to other practices, delimits its domain of objects, and designates what it considers to be the totality of its future tasks. The notion of life played this role to some extent in biology during a certain period.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the notion of life was hardly used in studying nature: one classified natural beings, whether living or non-living, in a vast hierarchical tableau which went from minerals to man; the break between the minerals and the plants or animals was relatively undecided; epistemologically it was only important to fix their positions once and for all in an indisputable way.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the description and analysis of these natural beings showed, through the use of more highly perfected instruments and the latest techniques, an entire domain of objects, an entire field of relations and processes which have enabled us to define the specificity of biology in the knowledge of nature. Can one say that research into life has finally constituted itself in biological science? Has the concept of life been responsible for the organisation of biological knowledge? I don't think so. It seems to me more likely that the transformations of biological knowledge at the end of the eighteenth century, were demonstrated on one hand by a whole series of new concepts for use in scientific discourse and on the other hand gave rise to a notion like that of life which has enabled us to designate, to delimit and to situate a certain type of scientific discourse, among other things. I would say that the notion of life is not a scientific concept; it has been an epistemological indicator of which the classifying, delimiting and other functions had an effect on scientific discussions, and not on what they were talking about:

Well, it seems to me that the notion of human nature is of the same type. It was not by studying human nature that linguists discovered the laws of consonant mutation, or Freud the principles of the analysis of dreams, or cultural anthropologists the structure of myths. In the history of knowledge, the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of an epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history. I would find it difficult to see in this a scientific concept.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, in the first place, if we were able to specify in terms of, let's say, neural networks the properties of human cognitive structure that make it possible for the child to acquire these complicated systems, then I at least would have no hesitation in describing those properties as being a constituent element of human nature. That is, there is something biologically given, unchangeable, a foundation for whatever it is that we do with our mental capacities in this case.

But I would like to pursue a little further the line of development that you outlined, with which in fact I entirely agree, about the concept of life as an organising concept in the biological sciences.

It seems to me that one might speculate a bit further speculate in this case, since we're talking about the future, not the past-and ask whether the concept of human nature or of innate organising mechanisms or of intrinsic mental schematism or whatever we want to call it, I don't see much difference between them, but let's call it human nature for shorthand, might not provide for biology the next peak to try to scale, after having-at least in the minds of the biologists, though one might perhaps question this-already answered to the satisfaction of some the question of what is life.

In other words, to be precise, is it possible to give a biological explanation or a physical explanation...is it possible to characterise, in terms of the physical concepts presently available to us, the ability of the child to acquire complex systems of knowledge; and furthermore, critically, having acquired such systems of knowledge, to make use of this knowledge in the free and creative and remarkably varied ways in which he does?

Can we explain in biological terms, ultimately in physical terms, these properties of both acquiring knowledge in the first place and making use of it in the second? I really see no reason to believe that we can; that is, it's an article of faith on the part of scientists that since science has explained many other things it will also explain this.

In a sense one might say that this is a variant of the body/mind problem. But if we look back at the way in which science has scaled various peaks, and at the way in which the concept of life was finally acquired by science after having been beyond its vision for a long period, then I think we notice at many points in history-and in fact the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are particularly clear examples-that scientific advances were possible precisely because the domain of physical science was itself enlarged. Classic cases are Newton's gravitational forces. To the Cartesians, action at a distance was a mystical concept, and in fact to Newton himself it was an occult quality, a mystical entity, which didn't belong within science. To the common sense of a later generation, action at a distance has been incorporated within science.

What happened was that the notion of body, the notion of the physical had changed. To a Cartesian, a strict Cartesian, if such a person appeared today, it would appear that there is no explanation for the behaviour of the heavenly bodies. Certainly there is no explanation for the phenomena that are explained in terms of electro-magnetic force, let's say. But by the extension of physical science to incorporate hitherto unavailable concepts, entirely new ideas, it became possible to successively build more and more complicated structures that incorporated a larger range of phenomena.

For example, it's certainly not true that the physics of the Cartesians is able to explain, let's say, the behaviour of elementary particles in physics, just as it's unable to explain the concepts of life.

Similarly, I think, one might ask the question whether physical science as known today, including biology, incorporates within itself the principles and the concepts that will enable it to give an account of innate human intellectual capacities and, even more profoundly, of the ability to make use of those capacities under conditions of freedom in the way which humans do. I see no particular reason to believe that biology or physics now contain those concepts, and it may be that to scale the next peak, to make the next step, they will have to focus on this organising concept, and may very well have to broaden their scope in order to come to grips with it.

**FOUCAULT:**

Yes.

**ELDERS:**

Perhaps I may try to ask one more specific question leading out of both your answers, because I'm afraid otherwise the debate will become too technical. I have the impression that one of the main differences between you both has its origin in a difference in approach. You, Mr. Foucault, are especially interested in the way science or scientists function in a certain period, whereas Mr. Chomsky is more interested in the so-called "what-questions": why we possess language; not just how language functions, but what's the reason for our having language. We can try to elucidate this in a more general way: you, Mr. Foucault, are delimiting eighteenth century rationalism, whereas you, Mr. Chomsky, are combining eighteenth-century rationalism with notions like freedom and creativity.

Perhaps we could illustrate this in a more general way with examples from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, first I should say that I approach classical rationalism not really as a historian of science or a historian of philosophy, but from the rather different point of view of someone who has a certain range of scientific notions and is interested in seeing how at an earlier stage people may have been groping towards these notions, possibly without even realising what they were groping towards.

So one might say that I'm looking at history not as an antiquarian, who is interested in finding out and giving a precisely accurate account of what the thinking of the seventeenth century was- I don't mean to demean that activity, it's just not mine-but rather from the point of view of, let's say, an art lover, who wants to look at the seventeenth century to find in it things that are of particular value, and that obtain part of their value in part because of the perspective with which he approaches them.

And I think that, without objecting to the other approach, my approach is legitimate; that is, I think it is perfectly possible to go back to earlier stages of scientific thinking on the basis of our present understanding, and to perceive how great thinkers were, within the limitations of their time, groping towards concepts and ideas and insights that they themselves could not be clearly aware of.

For example, I think that anyone can do this about his own thought. Without trying to compare oneself to the great thinkers of the past, anyone can..

**ELDERS:**

Why not?

**CHOMSKY:**

...look at...

**ELDERS:**

Why not?

**CHOMSKY:**

All right [laughs], anyone can consider what he now knows and can ask what he knew twenty years ago, and can see that in some unclear fashion he was striving towards something which he can only now understand ... if he is fortunate.

Similarly I think it's possible to look at the past, without distorting your view, and it is in these terms that I want to look at the seventeenth century. Now, when I look back at the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what strikes me particularly is the way in which, for example, Descartes and his followers were led to postulate mind as a thinking substance independent of the body. If you look at their reasons for postulating this second substance, mind, thinking entity, they were that Descartes was able to convince himself, rightly or wrongly, it doesn't matter at the moment, that events in the physical world and even much of the behavioural and psychological world, for example a good deal of sensation, were explicable in terms of what he considered to be physics-wrongly, as we now believe-that is, in terms of things bumping into each other and turning and moving and so on.

He thought that in those terms, in terms of the mechanical principle, he could explain a certain domain of phenomena; and then he observed that there was a range of phenomena that he argued could not be explained in those terms. And he therefore postulated a creative principle to account for that domain of phenomena, the principle of mind with its own properties. And then later followers, many who didn't regard themselves as Cartesians, for example many who regarded themselves as strongly anti-rationalistic, developed the concept of creation within a system of rule.

I won't bother with the details, but my own research into the subject led me ultimately to Wilhelm von Humboldt, who certainly didn't consider himself a Cartesian, but nevertheless in a rather different framework and within a different historical period and with different insight, in a remarkable and ingenious way, which, I think, is of lasting importance, also developed the concept of internalised form-fundamentally the concept of free creation within a system of rule in an effort to come to grips with some of the same difficulties and problems that the Cartesians faced in their terms.

Now I believe, and here I would differ from a lot of my colleagues, that the move of Descartes to the postulation of a second substance was a very scientific move; it was not a metaphysical or an anti-scientific move. In fact, in many ways it was very much like Newton's intellectual move when he postulated action at a distance; he was moving into the domain of the occult, if you like. He was moving into the domain of something that went beyond well-established science, and was trying to integrate it with well-established science by developing a theory in which these notions could be properly clarified and explained.

Now Descartes, I think, made a similar intellectual move in postulating a second substance. Of course he failed where Newton succeeded; that is, he was unable to lay the groundwork for a mathematical theory of mind, as achieved by Newton and his followers, which laid the

groundwork for a mathematical theory of physical entities that incorporated such occult notions as action at a distance and later electromagnetic forces and so on.

But then that poses for us, I think, the task of carrying on and developing this, if you like, mathematical theory of mind; by that I simply mean a precisely articulated, clearly formulated, abstract theory which will have empirical consequences, which will let us know whether the theory is right or wrong, or on the wrong track or the right track, and at the same time will have the properties of mathematical science, that is, the properties of rigour and precision and a structure that makes it possible for us to deduce conclusions from assumptions and so on.

Now it's from that point of view that I try to look back at the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to pick out points, which I think are really there, even though I certainly recognise, and in fact would want to insist, that the individuals in question may not have seen it this way.

**ELDERS:**

Mr. Foucault, I suppose you will have a severe criticism of this?

**FOUCAULT:**

No ... there are just one or two little historical points. I cannot object to the account which you have given in your historical analysis of their reasons and of their modality. But there is one thing one could nevertheless add: when you speak of creativity as conceived by Descartes, I wonder if you don't transpose to Descartes an idea which is to be found among his successors or even certain of his contemporaries. According to Descartes, the mind was not so very creative. It saw, it perceived, it was illuminated by the evidence.

Moreover, the problem which Descartes never resolved nor entirely mastered, was that of understanding how one could pass from one of these clear and distinct ideas, one of these intuitions, to another, and what status should be given to the evidence of the passage between them. I can't see exactly either the creation in the moment where the mind grasped the truth for Descartes, or even the real creation in the passage from one truth to another.

On the contrary, you can find, I think, at the same time in Pascal and Leibniz, something which is much closer to what you are looking for: in other words in Pascal and in the whole Augustinian stream of Christian thought, you find this idea of a mind in profundity; of a mind folded back in the intimacy of itself which is touched by a sort of unconsciousness, and which can develop its potentialities by the deepening of the self. And that is why the grammar of Port Royal, to which you refer, is, I think, much more Augustinian than Cartesian.

And furthermore you will find in Leibniz something which you will certainly like: the idea that in the profundity of the mind is incorporated a whole web of logical relations which constitutes, in a certain sense, the rational unconscious of the consciousness, the not yet clarified and visible form of the reason itself, which the monad or the individual develops little by little, and with which he understands the whole world.

That's where I would make a very small criticism.

**ELDERS:**

Mr. Chomsky, one moment please.

I don't think it's a question of making a historical criticism, but of formulating your own opinions on these quite fundamental concepts...

**FOUCAULT:**

But one's fundamental opinions can be demonstrated in precise analyses such as these.

**ELDERS:**

Yes, all right. But I remember some passages in your History of Madness, which give a description of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in terms of repression, suppression and exclusion, while for Mr. Chomsky this period is full of creativity and individuality.

Why do we have at that period, for the first time, closed psychiatric or insane asylums? I think this is a very fundamental question...

**FOUCAULT:**

...on creativity, yes!

But I don't know, perhaps Mr. Chomsky would like to speak about it...

**ELDERS:**

No, no, no, please go on. Continue.

**FOUCAULT:**

No, I would like to say this: in the historical studies that I have been able to make, or have tried to make, I have without any doubt given very little room to what you might call the creativity of individuals, to their capacity for creation, to their aptitude for inventing by themselves, for originating concepts, theories or scientific truths by themselves.

But I believe that my problem is different to that of Mr. Chomsky. Mr. Chomsky has been fighting against linguistic behaviourism, which attributed almost nothing to the creativity of the speaking subject; the speaking subject was a kind of surface on which information came together little by little, which he afterwards combined.

In the field of the history of science or, more generally, the history of thought, the problem was completely different.

The history of knowledge has tried for a long time to obey two claims. One is the claim of attribution: each discovery should not only be situated and dated, but should also be attributed to someone; it should have an inventor and someone responsible for it. General or collective phenomena on the other hand, those which by definition can't be "attributed", are normally devalued: they are still traditionally described through words like "tradition", "mentality", "modes"; and one lets them play the negative role of a brake in relation to the "originality" of the inventor. In brief, this has to do with the principle of the sovereignty of the subject applied to the history of knowledge. The other claim is that which no longer allows us to save the subject, but the truth: so that it won't be compromised by history, it is necessary not that the truth constitutes itself in history, but only that it reveals itself in it; hidden to men's eyes, provisionally inaccessible, sitting in the shadows, it will wait to be unveiled. The history of truth would be essentially its delay, its fall or the disappearance of the obstacles which have impeded it until now from coming to light. The historical dimension of knowledge is always negative in relation to the truth. It isn't difficult to see how these two claims were adjusted, one to the other: the phenomena of collective order, the "common thought", the "prejudices" of the "myths" of a period, constituted the obstacles which the subject of knowledge had to surmount or to outlive in order to have access finally to the truth; he had to be in an "eccentric" position in order to "discover". At one level this



seems to be invoking a certain “romanticism” about the history of science: the solitude of the man of truth, the originality which reopened itself onto the original through history and despite it. I think that, more fundamentally, it’s a matter of superimposing the theory of knowledge and the subject of knowledge on the history of knowledge.

And what if understanding the relation of the subject to the truth, were just an effect of knowledge? What if understanding were a complex, multiple, non-individual formation, not “subjected to the subject”, which produced effects of truth? One should then put forward positively this entire dimension which the history of science has negativised; analyse the productive capacity of knowledge as a collective practice; and consequently replace individuals and their “knowledge” in the development of a knowledge which at a given moment functions according to certain rules which one can register and describe.

You will say to me that all the Marxist historians of science have been doing this for a long time. But when one sees how they work with these facts and especially what use they make of the notions of consciousness, of ideology as opposed to science, one realises that they are for the main part more or less detached from the theory of knowledge.

In any case, what I am anxious about is substituting transformations of the understanding for the history of the discoveries of knowledge. Therefore I have, in appearance at least, a completely different attitude to Mr. Chomsky apropos creativity, because for me it is a matter of effacing the dilemma of the knowing subject, while for him it is a matter of allowing the dilemma of the speaking subject to reappear.

But if he has made it reappear, if he has described it, it is because he can do so. The linguists have for a long time now analysed language as a system with a collective value. The understanding as a collective totality of rules allowing such and such a knowledge to be produced in a certain period, has hardly been studied until now. Nevertheless, it presents some fairly positive characteristics to the observer. Take for example medicine at the end of the eighteenth century: read twenty medical works, it doesn’t matter which, of the years 1770 to 1780, then twenty others from the years 1820 to 1830, and I would say, quite at random, that in forty or fifty years everything had changed; what one talked about, the way one talked about it, not just the remedies, of course, not just the maladies and their classifications, but the outlook itself. Who was responsible for that? Who was the author of it? It is artificial, I think, to say Bichat, or even to expand a little and to say the first anatomical clinicians. It’s a matter of a collective and complex transformation of medical understanding in its practice and its rules. And this transformation is far from a negative phenomenon: it is the suppression of a negativity, the effacement of an obstacle, the disappearance of prejudices, the abandonment of old myths, the retreat of irrational beliefs, and access finally freed to experience and to reason; it represents the application of an entirely new *brille*, with its choices and exclusions; a new play with its own rules, decisions and limitations, with its own inner logic, its parameters and its blind alleys, all of which lead to the modification of the point of origin. And it is in this functioning that the understanding itself exists. So, if one studies the history of knowledge, one sees that there are two broad directions of analysis: according to one, one has to show how, under what conditions and for what reasons, the understanding modifies itself in its formative rules, without passing through an original “inventor” discovering the “truth”; and according to the other, one has to show how the working of the rules of an understanding can produce in an individual new and unpublished knowledge. Here my aim rejoins, with imperfect methods and in a quite inferior mode, Mr. Chomsky’s project: accounting for the fact that with a few rules or definite elements, unknown totalities, never even produced, can be

brought to light by individuals. To resolve this problem, Mr. Chomsky has to reintroduce the dilemma of the subject in the field of grammatical analysis. To resolve an analogous problem in the field of history with which I am involved, one has to do the opposite, in a way: to introduce the point of view of understanding, of its rules, of its systems, of its transformations of totalities in the game of individual knowledge. Here and there the problem of creativity cannot be resolved in the same way, or rather, it can't be formulated in the same terms, given the state of disciplines inside which it is put.

**CHOMSKY:**

I think in part we're slightly talking at cross-purposes, because of a different use of the term creativity. In fact, I should say that my use of the term creativity is a little bit idiosyncratic and therefore the onus falls on me in this case, not on you. But when I speak of creativity, I'm not attributing to the concept the notion of value that is normal when we speak of creativity. That is, when you speak of scientific creativity, you're speaking, properly, of the achievements of a Newton. But in the context in which I have been speaking about creativity, it's a normal human act.

I'm speaking of the kind of creativity that any child demonstrates when he's able to come to grips with a new situation: to describe it properly, react to it properly, tell one something about it, think about it in a new fashion for him and so on. I think it's appropriate to call those acts creative, but of course without thinking of those acts as being the acts of a Newton.

In fact it may very well be true that creativity in the arts or the sciences, that which goes beyond the normal, may really involve properties of, well, I would also say of human nature, which may not exist fully developed in the mass of mankind, and may not constitute part of the normal creativity of everyday life.

Now my belief is that science can look forward to the problem of normal creativity as a topic that it can perhaps incorporate within itself. But I don't believe, and I suspect you will agree, that science can look forward, at least in the reasonable future, to coming to grips with true creativity, the achievements of the great artist and the great scientist. It has no hope of accommodating these unique phenomena within its grasp. It's the lower levels of creativity that I've been speaking of.

Now, as far as what you say about the history of science is concerned, I think that's correct and illuminating and particularly relevant in fact to the kinds of enterprise that I see lying before us in psychology and linguistics and the philosophy of the mind.

That is, I think there are certain topics that have been repressed or put aside during the scientific advances of the past few centuries.

For example, this concern with low-level creativity that I'm referring to was really present in Descartes also. For example, when he speaks of the difference between a parrot, who can mimic what is said, and a human, who can say new things that are appropriate to the situation, and when he specifies that as being the distinctive property that designates the limits of physics and carries us into the science of the mind, to use modern terms, I think he really is referring to the kind of creativity that I have in mind; and I quite agree with your comments about the other sources of such notions.

Well, these concepts, even in fact the whole notion of the organisation of sentence structure, were put aside during the period of great advances that followed from Sir William Jones and others and the development of comparative philology as a whole.

But now, I think, we can go beyond that period when it was necessary to forget and to pretend that these phenomena did not exist and to turn to something else. In this period of comparative philology and also, in my view, structural linguistics, and much of behavioural psychology, and in fact much of what grows out of the empiricist tradition in the study of mind and behaviour, it is possible to put aside those limitations and bring into our consideration just those topics that animated a good deal of the thinking and speculation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and to incorporate them within a much broader and I think deeper science of man that will give a fuller role-though it is certainly not expected to give a complete understanding to such notions as innovation and creativity and freedom and the production of new entities, new elements of thought and behaviour within some system of rule and schematism. Those are concepts that I think we can come to grips with.

**ELDERS:**

Well, may I first of all ask you not to make your answers so lengthy? [Foucault laughs.]

When you discuss creativity and freedom, I think that one of the misunderstandings, if any misunderstandings have arisen, has to do with the fact that Mr. Chomsky is starting from a limited number of rules with infinite possibilities of application, whereas you, Mr. Foucault, are stressing the inevitability of the “grille” of our historical and psychological determinisms, which also applies to the way in which we discover new ideas.

Perhaps we can sort this out, not by analysing the scientific process, but just by analysing our own thought process.

When you discover a new fundamental idea, Mr. Foucault, do you believe, that as far as your own personal creativity is concerned something is happening that makes you feel that you are being liberated; that something new has been developed? Perhaps afterwards you discover that it was not so new. But do you yourself believe that, within your own personality, creativity and freedom are working together, or not?

**FOUCAULT:**

Oh, you know, I don't believe that the problem of personal experience is so very important...

**ELDERS:**

Why not?

**FOUCAULT:**

...in a question like this. No, I believe that there is in reality quite a strong similarity between what Mr. Chomsky said and what I tried to show: in other words there exist in fact only possible creations, possible innovations. One can only, in terms of language or of knowledge, produce something new by putting into play a certain number of rules which will define the acceptability or the grammaticality of these statements, or which will define, in the case of knowledge, the scientific character of the statements.

Thus, we can roughly say that linguists before Mr. Chomsky mainly insisted on the rules of construction of statements and less on the innovation represented by every new statement, or the hearing of a new statement. And in the history of science or in the history of thought, we placed more emphasis on individual creation, and we had kept aside and left in the shadows these communal, general rules, which obscurely manifest themselves through every scientific discovery, every scientific invention, and even every philosophical innovation.

And to that degree, when I no doubt wrongly believe that I am saying something new, I am nevertheless conscious of the fact that in my statement there are rules at work, not only linguistic rules, but also epistemological rules, and those rules characterise contemporary knowledge.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, perhaps I can try to react to those comments within my own framework in a way which will maybe shed some light on this.

Let's think again of a human child, who has in his mind some schematism that determines the kind of language he can learn. Okay. And then, given experience, he very quickly knows the language, of which this experience is a part, or in which it is included.

Now this is a normal act; that is, it's an act of normal intelligence, but it's a highly creative act.

If a Martian were to look at this process of acquiring this vast and complicated and intricate system of knowledge on the basis of this ridiculously small quantity of data, he would think of it as an immense act of invention and creation. In fact, a Martian would, I think, consider it as much of an achievement as the invention of, let's say, any aspect of a physical theory on the basis of the data that was presented to the physicist.

However, if this hypothetical Martian were then to observe that every normal human child immediately carries out this creative act and they all do it in the same way and without any difficulty, whereas it takes centuries of genius to slowly carry out the creative act of going from evidence to a scientific theory, then this Martian would, if he were rational, conclude that the structure of the knowledge that is acquired in the case of language is basically internal to the human mind; whereas the structure of physics is not, in so direct a way, internal to the human mind. Our minds are not constructed so that when we look at the phenomena of the world theoretical physics comes forth, and we write it down and produce it; that's not the way our minds are constructed.

Nevertheless, I think there is a possible point of connection and it might be useful to elaborate it: that is, how is it that we are able to construct any kind of scientific theory at all? How is it that, given a small amount of data, it's possible for various scientists, for various geniuses even, over a long period of time, to arrive at some kind of a theory, at least in some cases, that is more or less profound and more or less empirically adequate?

This is a remarkable fact.

And, in fact, if it were not the case that these scientists, including the geniuses, were beginning with a very narrow limitation on the class of possible scientific theories, if they didn't have built into their minds somehow an obviously unconscious specification of what is a possible scientific theory, then this inductive leap would certainly be quite impossible: just as if each child did not have built into his mind the concept of human language in a very restricted way, then the inductive leap from data to knowledge of a language would be impossible.

So even though the process of, let's say, deriving knowledge of physics from data is far more complex, far more difficult for an organism such as ours, far more drawn out in time, requiring intervention of genius and so on and so forth, nevertheless in a certain sense the achievement of discovering physical science or biology or whatever you like, is based on something rather similar to the achievement of the normal child in discovering the structure of his language: that is, it must be achieved on the basis of an initial limitation, an initial restriction on the class of possible theories. If you didn't begin by knowing that only certain things are possible theories, then no induction would be possible at all. You could go from data anywhere, in any direction.

And the fact that science converges and progresses itself shows us that such initial limitations and structures exist.

If we really want to develop a theory of scientific creation, or for that matter artistic creation, I think we have to focus attention precisely on that set of conditions that, on the one hand, delimits and restricts the scope of our possible knowledge, while at the same time permitting the inductive leap to complicated systems of knowledge on the basis of a small amount of data. That, it seems to me, would be the way to progress towards a theory of scientific creativity, or in fact towards any question of epistemology.

**ELDERS:**

Well, I think if we take this point of the initial limitation with all its creative possibilities, I have the impression that for Mr. Chomsky rules and freedom are not opposed to each other, but more or less imply each other. Whereas I get the impression that it is just the reverse for you, Mr. Foucault. What are your reasons for putting it the opposite way, for this really is a very fundamental point in the debate, and I hope we can elaborate it.

To formulate the same problem in other terms: can you think of universal knowledge without any form of repression?

**FOUCAULT:**

Well, in what Mr. Chomsky has just said there is something which seems to me to create a little difficulty; perhaps I understood it badly.

I believe that you have been talking about a limited number of possibilities in the order of a scientific theory. That is true if you limit yourself to a fairly short period of time, whatever it may be. But if you consider a longer period, it seems to me that what is striking is the proliferation of possibilities by divergences.

For a long time the idea has existed that the sciences, knowledge, followed a certain line of "progress", obeying the principle of "growth", and the principle of the convergence of all these kinds of knowledge. And yet when one sees how the European understanding, which turned out to be a world-wide and universal understanding in a historical and geographical sense, developed, can one say that there has been growth? I, myself, would say that it has been much more a matter of transformation.

Take, as an example, animal and plant classifications. How often have they not been rewritten since the Middle Ages according to completely different rules: by symbolism, by natural history, by comparative anatomy, by the theory of evolution. Each time this rewriting makes the knowledge completely different in its functions, in its economy, in its internal relations. You have there a principle of divergence, much more than one of growth. I would much rather say that there are many different ways of making possible simultaneously a few types of knowledge. There is, therefore, from a certain point of view, always an excess of data in relation to possible systems in a given period, which causes them to be experienced within their boundaries, even in their deficiency, which means that one fails to realise their creativity; and from another point of view, that of the historian, there is an excess, a proliferation of systems for a small amount of data, from which originates the widespread idea that it is the discovery of new facts which determines movement in the history of science.

**CHOMSKY:**

Here perhaps again, let me try to synthesise a bit. I agree with your conception of scientific

progress; that is, I don't think that scientific progress is simply a matter of the accumulated addition of new knowledge and the absorption of new theories and so on. Rather I think that it has this sort of jagged pattern that you describe, forgetting certain problems and leaping to new theories..

**FOUCAULT:**

And transforming the same knowledge.

**CHOMSKY:**

Right. But I think that one can perhaps hazard an explanation for that. Oversimplifying grossly, I really don't mean what I'm going to say now literally, one might suppose that the following general lines of an explanation are accurate: it is as if, as human beings of a particular biologically given organisation, we have in our heads, to start with, a certain set of possible intellectual structures, possible sciences. Okay?

Now, in the lucky event that some aspect of reality happens to have the character of one of these structures in our mind, then we have a science: that is to say that, fortunately, the structure of our mind and the structure of some aspect of reality coincide sufficiently so that we develop an intelligible science.

It is precisely this initial limitation in our minds to a certain kind of possible science which provides the tremendous richness and creativity of scientific knowledge. It is important to stress-and this has to do with your point about limitation and freedom-that were it not for these limitations, we would not have the creative act of going from a little bit of knowledge, a little bit of experience, to a rich and highly articulated and complicated array of knowledge. Because if anything could be possible, then nothing would be possible.

But it is precisely because of this property of our minds, which in detail we don't understand, but which, I think, in a general way we can begin to perceive, which presents us with certain possible intelligible structures, and which in the course of history and insight and experience begin to come into focus or fall out of focus and so on; it is precisely because of this property of our minds that the progress of science, I think, has this erratic and jagged character that you describe.

That doesn't mean that everything is ultimately going to fall within the domain of science. Personally I believe that many of the things we would like to understand, and maybe the things we would most like to understand, such as the nature of man, or the nature of a decent society, or lots of other things, might really fall outside the scope of possible human science.

**ELDERS:**

Well, I think that we are confronted again with the question of the inner relation between limitation and freedom. Do you agree, Mr. Foucault, with the statement about the combination of limitation, fundamental limitation? .

**FOUCAULT:**

It is not a matter of combination. Only creativity is possible in putting into play of a system of rules; it is not a mixture of order and freedom.

Where perhaps I don't completely agree with Mr. Chomsky, is when he places the principle of these regularities, in a way, in the interior of the mind or of human nature.

If it is a matter of whether these rules are effectively put to work by the human mind, all right; all right, too, if it is a question of whether the historian and the linguist can think it in their turn; it is all right also to say that these rules should allow us to realise what is said or thought by these individuals. But to say that these regularities are connected, as conditions of existence, to the human mind or its nature, is difficult for me to accept: it seems to me that one must, before reaching that point-and in any case I am talking only about the understanding-replace it in the field of other human practices, such as economics, technology, politics, sociology, which can serve them as conditions of formation, of models, of place, of apparition, etc. I would like to know whether one cannot discover the system of regularity, of constraint, which makes science possible, somewhere else, even outside the human mind, in social forms, in the relations of production, in the class struggles, etc.

For example, the fact that at a certain time madness became an object for scientific study, and an object of knowledge in the West, seems to me to be linked to a particular economic and social situation.

Perhaps the point of difference between Mr. Chomsky and myself is that when he speaks of science he probably thinks of the formal organisation of knowledge, whereas I am speaking of knowledge itself, that is to say, I think of the content of various knowledges which is dispersed into a particular society, permeates through that society, and asserts itself as the foundation for education, for theories, for practices, etc.

**ELDERS:**

But what does this theory of knowledge mean for your theme of the death of man or the end of the period of the nineteenth-twentieth centuries?

**FOUCAULT:**

But this doesn't have any relation to what we are talking about.

**ELDERS:**

I don't know, because I was trying to apply what you have said to your anthropological notion. You have already refused to speak about your own creativity and freedom, haven't you? Well, I'm wondering what are the psychological reasons for this.

**FOUCAULT:**

[Protesting.] Well, you can wonder about it, but I can't help that.

**ELDERS:**

Ah, well.

**FOUCAULT:**

I am not wondering about it.

**ELDERS:**

But what are the objective reasons, in relation to your conception of understanding, of knowledge, of science, for refusing to answer these personal questions?

When there is a problem for you to answer, what are your reasons for making a problem out of a personal question?

**FOUCAULT:**

No, I'm not making a problem out of a personal question; I make of a personal question an absence of a problem.

Let me take a very simple example, which I will not analyse, but which is this: How was it possible that men began, at the end of the eighteenth century, for the first time in the history of Western thought and of Western knowledge, to open up the corpses of people in order to know what was the source, the origin, the anatomical needle, of the particular malady which was responsible for their deaths?

The idea seems simple enough. Well, four or five thousand years of medicine in the West were needed before we had the idea of looking for the cause of the malady in the lesion of a corpse.

If you tried to explain this by the personality of Bichat, I believe that would be without interest. If, on the contrary, you tried to establish the place of disease and of death in society at the end of the eighteenth century, and what interest industrial society effectively had in quadrupling the entire population in order to expand and develop itself, as a result of which medical surveys of society were made, big hospitals were opened, etc.; if you tried to find out how medical knowledge became institutionalised in that period, how its relations with other kinds of knowledge were ordered, well, then you could see how the relationship between disease, the hospitalised, ill person, the corpse, and pathological anatomy were made possible.

Here is, I believe, a form of analysis which I don't say is new, but which in any case has been much too neglected; and personal events have almost nothing to do with it.

**ELDERS:**

Yes, but nevertheless it would have been very interesting for us to know a little bit more about your arguments to refute this.

Could you, Mr. Chomsky-and as far as I'm concerned, it's my last question about this philosophical part of the debate-give your ideas about, for example, the way the social sciences are working? I'm thinking here especially about your severe attacks on behaviourism. And perhaps you could even explain a little the way Mr. Foucault is now working in a more or less behaviouristic way. [Both philosophers laugh.]

**CHOMSKY:**

I would like to depart from your injunction very briefly, just to make one comment about what Mr. Foucault just said.

I think that illustrates very nicely the way in which we're digging into the mountain from opposite directions, to use your original image. That is, I think that an act of scientific creation depends on two facts: one, some intrinsic property of the mind, another, some set of social and intellectual conditions that exist. And it is not a question, as I see it, of which of these we should study; rather we will understand scientific discovery, and similarly any other kind of discovery, when we know what these factors are and can therefore explain how they interact in a particular fashion.

My particular interest, in this connection at least, is with the intrinsic capacities of the mind; yours, as you say, is in the particular arrangement of social and economic and other conditions.

**FOUCAULT:**

But I don't believe that difference is connected to our characters-because at this moment it would make Mr. Elders right, and he must not be right.



**CHOMSKY:**

No, I agree, and...

**FOUCAULT:**

It's connected to the state of knowledge, of knowing, in which we are working. The linguistics with which you have been familiar, and which you have succeeded in transforming, excluded the importance of the creative subject, of the creative speaking subject; while the history of science such as it existed when people of my generation were starting to work, on the contrary, exalted individual creativity..

**CHOMSKY:**

Yes.

**FOUCAULT:**

...and put aside these collective rules.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yes, yes.

**QUESTION:**

Ah...

**ELDERS:**

Yes, please go on.

**QUESTION:**

It goes a bit back in your discussion, but what I should like to know, Mr. Chomsky, is this: you suppose a basic system of what must be in a way elementary limitations that are present in what you call human nature; to what extent do you think these are subject to historical change? Do you think, for instance, that they have changed substantially since, let's say, the seventeenth century? In that case, you could perhaps connect this with the ideas of Mr. Foucault?

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, I think that as a matter of biological and anthropological fact, the nature of human intelligence certainly has not changed in any substantial way, at least since the seventeenth century, or probably since Cro-Magnon man. That is, I think that the fundamental properties of our intelligence, those that are within the domain of what we are discussing tonight, are certainly very ancient; and that if you took a man from five thousand or maybe twenty thousand years ago, and placed him as a child within today's society, he would learn what everyone else learns, and he would be a genius or a fool or something else, but he wouldn't be fundamentally different.

But, of course, the level of acquired knowledge changes, social conditions change-those conditions that permit a person to think freely and break through the bonds of, let's say, superstitious constraint. And as those conditions change, a given human intelligence will progress to new forms of creation. In fact this relates very closely to the last question that Mr. Elders put, if I can perhaps say a word about that.

Take behavioural science, and think of it in these contexts. It seems to me that the fundamental property of behaviourism, which is in a way suggested by the odd term behavioural science, is that it is a negation of the possibility of developing a scientific theory. That is, what defines behaviourism is the very curious and self-destructive assumption that you are not permitted to create an interesting theory.

If physics, for example, had made the assumption that you have to keep to phenomena and their arrangement and such things, we would be doing Babylonian astronomy today. Fortunately physicists never made this ridiculous, extraneous assumption, which has its own historical reasons and had to do with all sorts of curious facts about the historical context in which behaviourism evolved.

But looking at it purely intellectually, behaviourism is the arbitrary insistence that one must not create a scientific theory of human behaviour; rather one must deal directly with phenomena and their interrelation, and no more something which is totally impossible in any other domain, and I assume impossible in the domain of human intelligence or human behaviour as well. So in this sense I don't think that behaviourism is a science. Here is a case in point of just the kind of thing that you mentioned and that Mr. Foucault is discussing: under certain historical circumstances, for example those in which experimental psychology developed, it was-for some reason which I won't go into-interesting and maybe important to impose some very strange limitations on the kind of scientific theory construction that was permitted, and those very strange limitations are known as behaviourism. Well, it has long since run its course, I think. Whatever value it may have had in 1880, it has no function today except constraining and limiting scientific inquiry and should therefore simply be dispensed with, in the same way one would dispense with a physicist who said: you're not allowed to develop a general physical theory, you're only allowed to plot the motions of the planets and make up more epicycles and so on and so forth. One forgets about that and puts it aside. Similarly one should put aside the very curious restrictions that define behaviourism; restrictions which are, as I said before, very much suggested by the term behavioural science itself.

We can agree, perhaps, that behaviour in some broad sense constitutes the data for the science of man. But to define a science by its data would be to define physics as the theory of meter-readings. And if a physicist were to say: yes, I'm involved in meter-reading science, we could be pretty sure that he was not going to get very far. They might talk about meter-readings and correlations between them and such things, but they wouldn't ever create physical theory.

And so the term itself is symptomatic of the disease in this case. We should understand the historical context in which these curious limitations developed, and having understood them, I believe, discard them and proceed in the science of man as we would in any other domain, that is by discarding entirely behaviourism and in fact, in my view, the entire empiricist tradition from which it evolved.

**QUESTION:**

So you are not willing to link your theory about innate limitations, with Mr. Foucault's theory of the "grille". There might be a certain connection. You see, Mr. Foucault says that an upsurge of creativity in a certain direction automatically removes knowledge in another direction, by a system of "grilles". Well, if you had a changing system of limitations, this might be connected.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, the reason for what he describes, I think, is different. Again, I'm oversimplifying. We have more possible sciences available intellectually. When we try out those intellectual constructions in a changing world of fact, we will not find cumulative growth. What we will find are strange leaps: here is a domain of phenomena, a certain science applies very nicely; now slightly broaden the range of phenomena, then another science, which is very different, happens to apply very beautifully, perhaps leaving out some of these other phenomena. Okay, that's scientific progress and that leads to the omission or forgetting of certain domains. But I think the reason for this is precisely this set of principles, which unfortunately, we don't know, which makes the whole discussion rather abstract, which defines for us what is a possible intellectual structure, a possible deep-science, if you like.

**ELDERS:**

Well, let's move over now to the second part of the discussion, to politics. First of all I would like to ask Mr. Foucault why he is so interested in politics, because he told me that in fact he likes politics much more than philosophy.

**FOUCAULT:**

I've never concerned myself, in any case, with philosophy. But that is not a problem. [He laughs.]

Your question is: why am I so interested in politics? But if I were to answer you very simply, I would say this: why shouldn't I be interested? That is to say, what blindness, what deafness, what density of ideology would have to weigh me down to prevent me from being interested in what is probably the most crucial subject to our existence, that is to say the society in which we live, the economic relations within which it functions, and the system of power which defines the regular forms and the regular permissions and prohibitions of our conduct. The essence of our life consists, after all, of the political functioning of the society in which we find ourselves.

So I can't answer the question of why I should be interested; I could only answer it by asking why shouldn't I be interested?

**ELDERS:**

You are obliged to be interested, isn't that so?

**FOUCAULT:**

Yes, at least, there isn't anything odd here which is worth question or answer. Not to be interested in politics, that's what constitutes a problem. So instead of asking me, you should ask someone who is not interested in politics and then your question would be well-founded, and you would have the right to say "Why, damn it, are you not interested?" [They laugh and the audience laughs.]

**ELDERS:**

Well, yes, perhaps. Mr. Chomsky, we are all very interested to know your political objectives, especially in relation to your well-known anarcho-syndicalism or, as you formulated it, libertarian socialism. What are the most important goals of your libertarian socialism?

**CHOMSKY:**

I'll overcome the urge to answer the earlier very interesting question that you asked me and turn to this one.

Let me begin by referring to something that we have already discussed, that is, if it is correct, as I believe it is, that a fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work, for creative inquiry, for free creation without the arbitrary limiting effect of coercive institutions, then, of course, it will follow that a decent society should maximise the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic to be realised. That means trying to overcome the elements of repression and oppression and destruction and coercion that exist in any existing society, ours for example, as a historical residue.

Now any form of coercion or repression, any form of autocratic control of some domain of existence, let's say, private ownership of capital or state control of some aspects of human life, any such autocratic restriction on some area of human endeavour, can be justified, if at all, only in terms of the need for subsistence, or the need for survival, or the need for defence against some horrible fate or something of that sort. It cannot be justified intrinsically. Rather it must be overcome and eliminated.

And I think that, at least in the technologically advanced societies of the West we are now certainly in a position where meaningless drudgery can very largely be eliminated, and to the marginal extent that it's necessary, can be shared among the population; where centralised autocratic control of, in the first place, economic institutions, by which I mean either private capitalism or state totalitarianism or the various mixed forms of state capitalism that exist here and there, has become a destructive vestige of history.

They are all vestiges that have to be overthrown, eliminated in favour of direct participation in the form of workers' councils or other free associations that individuals will constitute themselves for the purpose of their social existence and their productive labour.

Now a federated, decentralised system of free associations, incorporating economic as well as other social institutions, would be what I refer to as anarcho-syndicalism; and it seems to me that this is the appropriate form of social organisation for an advanced technological society, in which human beings do not have to be forced into the position of tools, of cogs in the machine. There is no longer any social necessity for human beings to be treated as mechanical elements in the productive process; that can be overcome and we must overcome it by a society of freedom and free association, in which the creative urge that I consider intrinsic to human nature, will in fact be able to realise itself in whatever way it will.

And again, like Mr. Foucault, I don't see how any human being can fail to be interested in this question. [Foucault laughs.]

**ELDERS:**

Do you believe, Mr. Foucault, that we can call our societies in anyway democratic, after listening to this statement from Mr. Chomsky?

**FOUCAULT:**

No, I don't have the least belief that one could consider our society democratic. [Laughs.]

If one understands by democracy the effective exercise of power by a population which is neither divided nor hierarchically ordered in classes, it is quite clear that we are very far from democracy. It is only too clear that we are living under a regime of a dictatorship of class, of a power of class which imposes itself by violence, even when the instruments of this violence are institutional and constitutional; and to that degree, there isn't any question of democracy for us.

Well. When you asked me why I was interested in politics, I refused to answer because it seemed evident to me, but perhaps your question was:

How am I interested in it?

And had you asked me that question, and in a certain sense I could say you have, I would say to you that I am much less advanced in my way; I go much less far than Mr. Chomsky. That is to say that I admit to not being able to define, nor for even stronger reasons to propose, an ideal social model for the functioning of our scientific or technological society.

On the other hand, one of the tasks that seems immediate and urgent to me, over and above anything else, is this: that we should indicate and show up, even where they are hidden, all the relationships of political power which actually control the social body and oppress or repress it.

What I want to say is this: it is the custom, at least in European society, to consider that power is localised in the hands of the government and that it is exercised through a certain number of particular institutions, such as the administration, the police, the army, and the apparatus of the state. One knows that all these institutions are made to elaborate and to transmit a certain number of decisions, in the name of the nation or of the state, to have them applied and to punish those who don't obey. But I believe that political power also exercises itself through the mediation of a certain number of institutions which look as if they have nothing in common with the political power, and as if they are independent of it, while they are not.

One knows this in relation to the family; and one knows that the university and in a general way, all teaching systems, which appear simply to disseminate knowledge, are made to maintain a certain social class in power; and to exclude the instruments of power of another social class. Institutions of knowledge, of foresight and care, such as medicine, also help to support the political power. It's also obvious, even to the point of scandal, in certain cases related to psychiatry.

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.

This critique and this fight seem essential to me for different reasons: firstly, because political power goes much deeper than one suspects; there are centres and invisible, little-known points of support; its true resistance, its true solidity is perhaps where one doesn't expect it. Probably it's insufficient to say that behind the governments, behind the apparatus of the State, there is the dominant class; one must locate the point of activity, the places and forms in which its domination is exercised. And because this domination is not simply the expression in political terms of economic exploitation, it is its instrument and, to a large extent, the condition which makes it possible; the suppression of the one is achieved through the exhaustive discernment of the other. Well, if one fails to recognise these points of support of class power, one risks allowing them to continue to exist; and to see this class power reconstitute itself even after an apparent revolutionary process.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yes, I would certainly agree with that, not only in theory but also in action. That is, there are two intellectual tasks: one, and the one that I was discussing, is to try to create the vision of a future just society; that is to create, if you like, a humanistic social theory that is based, if possible, on some firm and humane concept of the human essence or human nature. That's one task.

Another task is to understand very clearly the nature of power and oppression and terror and destruction in our own society. And that certainly includes the institutions you mentioned, as well as the central institutions of any industrial society, namely the economic, commercial and financial institutions and in particular, in the coming period, the great multi-national corporations, which are not very far from us physically tonight [i.e. Philips at Eindhoven].

Those are the basic institutions of oppression and coercion and autocratic rule that appear to be neutral despite everything they say: well, we're subject to the democracy of the market place, and that must be understood precisely in terms of their autocratic power, including the particular form of autocratic control that comes from the domination of market forces in an inegalitarian society.

Surely we must understand these facts, and not only understand them but combat them. And in fact, as far as one's own political involvements are concerned, in which one spends the majority of one's energy and effort, it seems to me that they must certainly be in that area. I don't want to get personal about it, but my own certainly are in that area, and I assume everyone's are.

Still, I think it would be a great shame to put aside entirely the somewhat more abstract and philosophical task of trying to draw the connections between a concept of human nature that gives full scope to freedom and dignity and creativity and other fundamental human characteristics, and to relate that to some notion of social structure in which those properties could be realised and in which meaningful human life could take place.

And in fact, if we are thinking of social transformation or social revolution, though it would be absurd, of course, to try to sketch out in detail the goal that we are hoping to reach, still we should know something about where we think we are going, and such a theory may tell it to us.

**FOUCAULT:**

Yes, but then isn't there a danger here? If you say that a certain human nature exists, that this human nature has not been given in actual society the rights and the possibilities which allow it to realise itself...that's really what you have said, I believe.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yes.

**FOUCAULT:**

And if one admits that, doesn't one risk defining this human nature which is at the same time ideal and real, and has been hidden and repressed until now – in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilisation, from our culture?

I will take an example by greatly simplifying it. The socialism of a certain period, at the end of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth century, admitted in effect that in capitalist societies man hadn't realised the full potential for his development and self-realisation; that human nature was effectively alienated in the capitalist system. And it dreamed of an ultimately liberated human nature.

What model did it use to conceive, project, and eventually realise that human nature? It was in fact the bourgeois model.

It considered that an alienated society was a society which, for example, gave pride of place to the benefit of all, to a sexuality of a bourgeois type, to a family of a bourgeois type, to an aesthetic of a bourgeois type. And it is moreover very true that this has happened in the Soviet Union and

in the popular democracies: a kind of society has been reconstituted which has been transposed from the bourgeois society of the nineteenth century. The universalisation of the model of the bourgeois has been the utopia which has animated the constitution of Soviet society.

The result is that you too realised, I think, that it is difficult to say exactly what human nature is.

Isn't there a risk that we will be led into error? Mao Tse-Tung spoke of bourgeois human nature and proletarian human nature, and he considers that they are not the same thing.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, you see, I think that in the intellectual domain of political action, that is the domain of trying to construct a vision of a just and free society on the basis of some notion of human nature, we face the very same problem that we face in immediate political action, namely, that of being impelled to do something, because the problems are so great, and yet knowing that whatever we do is on the basis of a very partial understanding of the social realities, and the human realities in this case.

For example, to be quite concrete, a lot of my own activity really has to do with the Vietnam War, and some of my own energy goes into civil disobedience. Well, civil disobedience in the U.S. is an action undertaken in the face of considerable uncertainties about its effects. For example, it threatens the social order in ways which might, one might argue, bring about fascism; and that would be a very bad thing for America, for Vietnam, for Holland and for everyone else. You know, if a great Leviathan like the United States were really to become fascist, a lot of problems would result; so that is one danger in undertaking this concrete act.

On the other hand there is a great danger in not undertaking it, namely, if you don't undertake it, the society of Indo-China will be torn to shreds by American power. In the face of these uncertainties one has to choose a course of action.

Well, similarly in the intellectual domain, one is faced with the uncertainties that you correctly pose. Our concept of human nature is certainly limited; it's partially socially conditioned, constrained by our own character defects and the limitations of the intellectual culture in which we exist. Yet at the same time it is of critical importance that we know what impossible goals we're trying to achieve, if we hope to achieve some of the possible goals. And that means that we have to be bold enough to speculate and create social theories on the basis of partial knowledge, while remaining very open to the strong possibility, and in fact overwhelming probability, that at least in some respects we're very far off the mark.

**ELDERS:**

Well, perhaps it would be interesting to delve a little deeper into this problem of strategy. I suppose that what you call civil disobedience is probably the same as what we call extra-parliamentary action?

**CHOMSKY:**

No, I think it goes beyond that.

Extra-parliamentary action would include, let's say, a mass legal demonstration, but civil disobedience is narrower than all extra-parliamentary action, in that it means direct defiance of what is alleged, incorrectly in my view, by the state to be law.

**ELDERS:**

So, for example, in the case of Holland, we had something like a population census. One was obliged to answer questions on official forms. You would call it civil disobedience if one refused to fill in the forms?

**CHOMSKY:**

Right. I would be a little bit careful about that, because, going back to a very important point that Mr. Foucault made, one does not necessarily allow the state to define what is legal. Now the state has the power to enforce a certain concept of what is legal, but power doesn't imply justice or even correctness, so that the state may define something as civil disobedience and may be wrong in doing so.

For example, in the United States the state defines it as civil disobedience to, let's say, derail an ammunition train that's going to Vietnam; and the state is wrong in defining that as civil disobedience, because it's legal and proper and should be done. It's proper to carry out actions that will prevent the criminal acts of the state, just as it is proper to violate a traffic ordinance in order to prevent a murder.

If I had stopped my car in front of a traffic light which was red, and then I drove through the red traffic light to prevent somebody from, let's say, machine-gunning a group of people, of course that's not an illegal act, it's an appropriate and proper action; no sane judge would convict you for such an action.

Similarly, a good deal of what the state authorities define as civil disobedience is not really civil disobedience: in fact, it's legal, obligatory behaviour in violation of the commands of the state, which may or may not be legal commands.

So one has to be rather careful about calling things illegal, I think.

**FOUCAULT:**

Yes, but I would like to ask you a question. When, in the United States, you commit an illegal act, do you justify it in terms of justice or of a superior legality, or do you justify it by the necessity of the class struggle, which is at the present time essential for the proletariat in their struggle against the ruling class?

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, here I would like to take the point of view which is taken by the American Supreme Court and probably other courts in such circumstances; that is, to try to settle the issue on the narrowest possible grounds. I would think that ultimately it would make very good sense, in many cases, to act against the legal institutions of a given society, if in so doing you're striking at the sources of power and oppression in that society.

However, to a very large extent existing law represents certain human values, which are decent human values; and existing law, correctly interpreted, permits much of what the state commands you not to do. And I think it's important to exploit the fact...

**FOUCAULT:**

Yeah.

**CHOMSKY:**

...it's important to exploit the areas of law which are properly formulated and then perhaps to act directly against those areas of law which simply ratify some system of power.



**FOUCAULT:**

But, but, I, I...

**CHOMSKY:**

Let me get...

**FOUCAULT:**

My question, my question was this: when you commit a clearly illegal act...

**CHOMSKY:**

...which I regard as illegal, not just the state.

**FOUCAULT:**

No, no, well, the state's...

**CHOMSKY:**

...that the state regards as illegal...

**FOUCAULT:**

...that the state considers as illegal.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yeah.

**FOUCAULT:**

Are you committing this act in virtue of an ideal justice, or because the class struggle makes it useful and necessary ? Do you refer to ideal justice, that's my problem.

**CHOMSKY:**

Again, very often when I do something which the state regards as illegal, I regard it as legal : that is, I regard the state as criminal. But in some instances that's not true. Let me be quite concrete about it and move from the area of class war to imperialist war, where the situation is somewhat clearer and easier.

Take international law, a very weak instrument as we know, but nevertheless one that incorporates some very interesting principles. Well, international law is, in many respects, the instrument of the powerful : it is a creation of states and their representatives. In developing the presently existing body of international law, there was no participation by mass movements of peasants.

The structure of international law reflects that fact; that is, international law permits much too wide a range of forceful intervention in support of existing power structures that define themselves as states against the interests of masses of people who happen to be organised in opposition to states.

Now that's a fundamental defect of international law and I think one is justified in opposing that aspect of international law as having no validity, as having no more validity than the divine right of kings. It's simply an instrument of the powerful to retain their power.

But, in fact, international law is not solely of that kind. And in fact there are interesting elements of international law, for example, embedded in the Nuremberg principles and the United Nations Charter, which permit, in fact, I believe, require the citizen to act against his own state in ways which the state will falsely regard as criminal. Nevertheless, he's acting legally, because international law also happens to prohibit the threat or use of force in international affairs, except under some very narrow circumstances, of which, for example, the war in Vietnam is not one. This means that in the particular case of the Vietnam War, which interests me most, the American state is acting in a criminal capacity. And the people have the right to stop criminals from committing murder. Just because the criminal happens to call your action illegal when you try to stop him, it doesn't mean it is illegal.

A perfectly clear case of that is the present case of the Pentagon Papers in the United States, which, I suppose, you know about.

Reduced to its essentials and forgetting legalisms, what is happening is that the state is trying to prosecute people for exposing its crimes. That's what it amounts to.

Now, obviously that's absurd, and one must pay no attention whatsoever to that distortion of any reasonable judicial process. Furthermore, I think that the existing system of law even explains why it is absurd. But if it didn't, we would then have to oppose that system of law.

#### **FOUCAULT:**

So it is in the name of a purer justice that you criticise the functioning of justice ?

There is an important question for us here. It is true that in all social struggles, there is a question of "justice". To put it more precisely, the fight against class justice, against its injustice, is always part of the social struggle : to dismiss the judges, to change the tribunals, to amnesty the condemned, to open the prisons, has always been part of social transformations as soon as they become slightly violent. At the present time in France the function of justice and the police is the target of many attacks from those whom we call the "gauchistes". But if justice is at stake in a struggle, then it is as an instrument of power; it is not in the hope that finally one day, in this or another society, people will be rewarded according to their merits, or punished according to their faults. Rather than thinking of the social struggle in terms of "justice", one has to emphasise justice in terms of the social struggle.

#### **CHOMSKY:**

Yeah, but surely you believe that your role in the war is a just role, that you are fighting a just war, to bring in a concept from another domain. And that, I think, is important. If you thought that you were fighting an unjust war, you couldn't follow that line of reasoning.

I would like to slightly reformulate what you said. It seems to me that the difference isn't between legality and ideal justice; it's rather between legality and better justice.

I would agree that we are certainly in no position to create a system of ideal justice, just as we are in no position to create an ideal society in our minds. We don't know enough and we're too limited and too biased and all sorts of other things. But we are in a position-and we must act as sensitive and responsible human beings in that position to imagine and move towards the creation of a better society and also a better system of justice. Now this better system will certainly have its defects. But if one compares the better system with the existing system, without being confused into thinking that our better system is the ideal system, we can then argue, I think, as follows :

The concept of legality and the concept of justice are not identical; they're not entirely distinct either. Insofar as legality incorporates justice in this sense of better justice, referring to a better society, then we should follow and obey the law, and force the state to obey the law and force the great corporations to obey the law, and force the police to obey the law, if we have the power to do so.

Of course, in those areas where the legal system happens to represent not better justice, but rather the techniques of oppression that have been codified in a particular autocratic system, well, then a reasonable human being should disregard and oppose them, at least in principle; he may not, for some reason, do it in fact.

**FOUCAULT:**

But I would merely like to reply to your first sentence, in which you said that if you didn't consider the war you make against the police to be just, you wouldn't make it.

I would like to reply to you in terms of Spinoza and say that the proletariat doesn't wage war against the ruling class because it considers such a war to be just. The proletariat makes war with the ruling class because, for the first time in history, it wants to take power. And because it will overthrow the power of the ruling class it considers such a war to be just.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yeah, I don't agree.

**FOUCAULT:**

One makes war to win, not because it is just.

**CHOMSKY:**

I don't, personally, agree with that.

For example, if I could convince myself that attainment of power by the proletariat would lead to a terrorist police state, in which freedom and dignity and decent human relations would be destroyed, then I wouldn't want the proletariat to take power. In fact the only reason for wanting any such thing, I believe, is because one thinks, rightly or wrongly, that some fundamental human values will be achieved by that transfer of power.

**FOUCAULT:**

When the proletariat takes power, it may be quite possible that the proletariat will exert towards the classes over which it has just triumphed, a violent, dictatorial and even bloody power. I can't see what objection one could make to this.

But if you ask me what would be the case if the proletariat exerted bloody, tyrannical and unjust power towards itself, then I would say that this could only occur if the proletariat hadn't really taken power, but that a class outside the proletariat, a group of people inside the proletariat, a bureaucracy or petit bourgeois elements had taken power.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, I'm not at all satisfied with that theory of revolution for a lot of reasons, historical and others. But even if one were to accept it for the sake of argument, still that theory maintains that it is proper for the proletariat to take power and exercise it in a violent and bloody and unjust fashion, because it is claimed, and in my opinion falsely, that that will lead to a more just

society, in which the state will wither away, in which the proletariat will be a universal class and so on and so forth. If it weren't for that future justification, the concept of a violent and bloody dictatorship of the proletariat would certainly be unjust. Now this is another issue, but I'm very sceptical about the idea of a violent and bloody dictatorship of the proletariat, especially when expressed by self-appointed representatives of a vanguard party, who, we have enough historical experience to know and might have predicted in advance, will simply be the new rulers over this society.

**FOUCAULT:**

Yes, but I haven't been talking about the power of the proletariat, which in itself would be an unjust power; you are right in saying that this would obviously be too easy. I would like to say that the power of the proletariat could, in a certain period, imply violence and a prolonged war against a social class over which its triumph or victory was not yet totally assured.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, look, I'm not saying there is an absolute... For example, I am not a committed pacifist. I would not hold that it is under all imaginable circumstances wrong to use violence, even though use of violence is in some sense unjust. I believe that one has to estimate relative justices.

But the use of violence and the creation of some degree of injustice can only be justified on the basis of the claim and the assessment-which always ought to be undertaken very, very seriously and with a good deal of scepticism that this violence is being exercised because a more just result is going to be achieved. If it does not have such a grounding, it is really totally immoral, in my opinion.

**FOUCAULT:**

I don't think that as far as the aim which the proletariat proposes for itself in leading a class struggle is concerned, it would be sufficient to say that it is in itself a greater justice. What the proletariat will achieve by expelling the class which is at present in power and by taking over power itself, is precisely the suppression of the power of class in general.

**CHOMSKY:**

Okay, but that's the further justification.

**FOUCAULT:**

That is the justification, but one doesn't speak in terms of justice but in terms of power.

**CHOMSKY:**

But it is in terms of justice; it's because the end that will be achieved is claimed as a just one.

No Leninist or whatever you like would dare to say "We, the proletariat, have a right to take power, and then throw everyone else into crematoria." If that were the consequence of the proletariat taking power, of course it would not be appropriate.

The idea is-and for the reasons I mentioned I'm sceptical about it-that a period of violent dictatorship, or perhaps violent and bloody dictatorship, is justified because it will mean the submergence and termination of class oppression, a proper end to achieve in human life; it is because of that final qualification that the whole enterprise might be justified. Whether it is or not is another issue.

**FOUCAULT:**

If you like, I will be a little bit Nietzschean about this; in other words, it seems to me that the idea of justice in itself is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power. But it seems to me that, in any case, the notion of justice itself functions within a society of classes as a claim made by the oppressed class and as justification for it.

**CHOMSKY:**

I don't agree with that.

**FOUCAULT:**

And in a classless society, I am not sure that we would still use this notion of justice.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, here I really disagree. I think there is some sort of an absolute basis—if you press me too hard I'll be in trouble, because I can't sketch it out—ultimately residing in fundamental human qualities, in terms of which a “real” notion of justice is grounded.

I think it's too hasty to characterise our existing systems of justice as merely systems of class oppression; I don't think that they are that. I think that they embody systems of class oppression and elements of other kinds of oppression, but they also embody a kind of groping towards the true humanly, valuable concepts of justice and decency and love and kindness and sympathy, which I think are real.

And I think that in any future society, which will, of course, never be the perfect society, we'll have such concepts again, which we hope, will come closer to incorporating a defence of fundamental human needs, including such needs as those for solidarity and sympathy and whatever, but will probably still reflect in some manner the inequities and the elements of oppression of the existing society.

However, I think what you're describing only holds for a very different kind of situation.

For example, let's take a case of national conflict. Here are two societies, each trying to destroy the other. No question of justice arises. The only question that arises is which side are you on? Are you going to defend your own society and destroy the other?

I mean, in a certain sense, abstracting away from a lot of historical problems, that's what faced the soldiers who were massacring each other in the trenches in the First World War. They were fighting for nothing. They were fighting for the right to destroy each other. And in that kind of circumstance no questions of justice arise.

And of course there were rational people, most of them in jail, like Karl Liebknecht, for example, who pointed that out and were in jail because they did so, or Bertrand Russell, to take another example on the other side. There were people who understood that there was no point to that mutual massacre in terms of any sort of justice and that they ought to just call it off.

Now those people were regarded as madmen or lunatics and criminals or whatever, but of course they were the only sane people around.

And in such a circumstance, the kind that you describe, where there is no question of justice, just the question of who's going to win a struggle to the death, then I think the proper human reaction is : call it off, don't win either way, try to stop it—and of course if you say that, you'll immediately be thrown in jail or killed or something of that sort, the fate of a lot of rational people.

But I don't think that's the typical situation in human affairs, and I don't think that's the situation in the case of class-conflict or social revolution. There I think that one can and must give an argument, if you can't give an argument you should extract yourself from the struggle. Give an argument that the social revolution that you're trying to achieve is in the ends of justice, is in the ends of realising fundamental human needs, not merely in the ends of putting some other group into power, because they want it.

**FOUCAULT:**

Well, do I have time to answer ?

**ELDERS:**

Yes.

**FOUCAULT:**

How much ? Because...

**ELDERS:**

Two minutes. [Foucault laughs.]

**FOUCAULT:**

But I would say that that is unjust. [Everybody laughs.]

**CHOMSKY:**

Absolutely, yes.

**FOUCAULT:**

No, but I don't want to answer in so little time. I would simply say this, 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 on these theoretical problems.

On the other hand, when we discussed the problem of human nature and political problems, then differences arose between us. And contrary to what you think, you can't prevent me from believing that these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realisation of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilisation, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and one can't, however regrettable it may be, put forward these notions to describe or justify a fight which should-and shall in principle-overthrow the very fundamentals of our society. This is an extrapolation for which I can't find the historical justification. That's the point...

**CHOMSKY:**

It's clear.

**ELDERS:**

Mr. Foucault, if you were obliged to describe our actual society in pathological terms, which of its kinds of madness would most impress you ?

**FOUCAULT:**

In our contemporary society?

**ELDERS:**

Yes.

**FOUCAULT:**

If I were to say with which malady contemporary society is most afflicted ?

**ELDERS:**

Yes.

**FOUCAULT:**

The definition of disease and of the insane, and the classification of the insane has been made in such a way as to exclude from our society a certain number of people. If our society characterised itself as insane, it would exclude itself. It pretends to do so for reasons of internal reform. Nobody is more conservative than those people who tell you that the modern world is afflicted by nervous anxiety or schizophrenia. It is in fact a cunning way of excluding certain people or certain patterns of behaviour.

So I don't think that one can, except as a metaphor or a game, validly say that our society is schizophrenic or paranoid, unless one gives these words a non-psychiatric meaning. But if you were to push me to an extreme, I would say that our society has been afflicted by a disease, a very curious, a very paradoxical disease, for which we haven't yet found a name; and this mental disease has a very curious symptom, which is that the symptom itself brought the mental disease into being. There you have it.

**ELDERS:**

Great. Well, I think we can immediately start the discussion.

**QUESTION:**

Mr. Chomsky, I would like to ask you one question. In your discussion you used the term "proletariat"; what do you mean by "proletariat" in a highly developed technological society ? I think this is a Marxist notion, which doesn't represent the exact sociological state of affairs.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yes, I think you are right, and that is one of the reasons why I kept hedging on that issue and saying I'm very sceptical about the whole idea, because I think the notion of a proletariat, if we want to use it, has to be given a new interpretation fitting to our present social conditions. Really, I'd even like to drop the word, since it's so loaded with specific historical connotations, and think instead of the people who do the productive work of the society, manual and intellectual work. I think those people should be in a position to organise the conditions of their work, and to determine the ends of their work and the uses to which it's put; and, because of my concept of human nature, I really think of that as partially including everyone. Because I think that any human being who is not physically or mentally deformed-and here I again must disagree with Monsieur Foucault and express my belief that the concept of mental illness probably does have an absolute character, to some extent at least-is not only capable of, but is insistent upon doing productive, creative work, if given the opportunity to do so.

I've never seen a child who didn't want to build something out of blocks, or learn something new, or try the next task. And the only reason why adults aren't like that is, I suppose, that they have been sent to school and other oppressive institutions, which have driven that out of them.

Now if that's the case, then the proletariat, or whatever you want to call it, can really be universal, that is, it can be all those human beings who are impelled by what I believe to be the fundamental human need to be yourself, which means to be creative, to be exploratory, to be inquisitive...

**QUESTION:**

May I interrupt ?

**CHOMSKY:**

.. to do useful things, you know.

**QUESTION:**

If you use such a category, which has another meaning in Marxist ...

**CHOMSKY:**

That's why I say maybe we ought to drop the concept.

**QUESTION:**

Wouldn't you do better to use another term ? In this situation I would like to ask another question : which groups, do you think, will make the revolution?

**CHOMSKY:**

Yes, that's a different question.

**QUESTION:**

It's an irony of history that at this moment young intellectuals, coming from the middle and upper classes, call themselves proletarians and say we must join the proletarians. But I don't see any class-conscious proletarians. And that's the great dilemma.

**CHOMSKY:**

Okay. Now I think you're asking a concrete and specific question, and a very reasonable one.

It is not true in our given society that all people are doing useful, productive work, or self-satisfying work-obviously that's very far from true – or that, if they were to do the kind of work they're doing under conditions of freedom, it would thereby become productive and satisfying.

Rather there are a very large number of people who are involved in other kinds of work. For example, the people who are involved in the management of exploitation, or the people who are involved in the creation of artificial consumption, or the people who are involved in the creation of mechanisms of destruction and oppression, or the people who are simply not given any place in a stagnating industrial economy. Lots of people are excluded from the possibility of productive labour.

And I think that the revolution, if you like, should be in the name of all human beings; but it will have to be conducted by certain categories of human beings, and those will be, I think, the human beings who really are involved in the productive work of society. Now what this is will differ, depending upon the society. In our society it includes, I think, intellectual workers; it includes a spectrum of people that runs from manual labourers to skilled workers, to engineers, to scientists, to a very large class of professionals, to many people in the so-called service occupations, which



really do constitute the overwhelming mass of the population, at least in the United States, and I suppose probably here too, and will become the mass of the population in the future.

And so I think that the student-revolutionaries, if you like, have a point, a partial point : that is to say, it's a very important thing in a modern advanced industrial society how the trained intelligentsia identifies itself. It's very important to ask whether they are going to identify themselves as social managers, whether they are going to be technocrats, or servants of either the state or private power, or, alternatively, whether they are going to identify themselves as part of the work force, who happen to be doing intellectual labour.

If the latter, then they can and should play a decent role in a progressive social revolution. If the former, then they're part of the class of oppressors.

**QUESTION:**

Thank you.

**ELDERS:**

Yes, go on please.

**QUESTION:**

I was struck, Mr. Chomsky, by what you said about the intellectual necessity of creating new models of society. One of the problems we have in doing this with student groups in Utrecht is that we are looking for consistency of values. One of the values you more or less mentioned is the necessity of decentralisation of power. People on the spot should participate in decision-making.

That's the value of decentralisation and participation : but on the other hand we're living in a society that makes it more and more necessary—or seems to make it more and more necessary—that decisions are made on a world-wide scale. And in order to have, for example, a more equal distribution of welfare, etc., it might be necessary to have more centralisation. These problems should be solved on a higher level. Well, that's one of the inconsistencies we found in creating your models of society, and we should like to hear some of your ideas on it.

I've one small additional question—or rather a remark to make to you. That is : how can you, with your very courageous attitude towards the war in Vietnam, survive in an institution like MIT, which is known here as one of the great war contractors and intellectual makers of this war?

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, let me answer the second question first, hoping that I don't forget the first one. Oh, no, I'll try the first question first; and then remind me if I forget the second.

In general, I am in favour of decentralisation. I wouldn't want to make it an absolute principle, but the reason I would be in favour of it, even though there certainly is, I think, a wide margin of speculation here, is because I would imagine that in general a system of centralised power will operate very efficiently in the interest of the most powerful elements within it.

Now a system of decentralised power and free association will of course face the problem, the specific problem that you mention, of inequity—one region is richer than the other, etc. But my own guess is that we're safer in trusting to what I hope are the fundamental human emotions of sympathy and the search for justice, which may arise within a system of free association.

I think we're safer in hoping for progress on the basis of those human instincts than on the basis of the institutions of centralised power, which, I believe, will almost inevitably act in the interest of their most powerful components.

Now that's a little abstract and too general, and I wouldn't want to claim that it's a rule for all occasions, but I think it's a principle that's effective in a lot of occasions.

So, for example, I think that a democratic socialist libertarian United States would be more likely to give substantial aid to East Pakistani refugees than a system of centralised power which is basically operating in the interest of multinational corporations. And, you know, I think the same is true in a lot of other cases. But it seems to me that that principle, at least, deserves some thought.

As to the idea, which was perhaps lurking in your question anyway-it's an idea that's often expressed-that there is some technical imperative, some property of advanced technological society that requires centralised power and decision-making-and a lot of people say that, from Robert McNamara on down-as far as I can see it's perfect nonsense, I've never seen any argument in favour of it.

It seems to me that modern technology, like the technology of data-processing, or communication and so on, has precisely the opposite implications. It implies that relevant information and relevant understanding can be brought to everyone quickly. It doesn't have to be concentrated in the hands of a small group of managers who control all knowledge, all information and all decision-making. So technology, I think, can be liberating, it has the property of being possibly liberating; it's converted, like everything else, like the system of justice, into an instrument of oppression because of the fact that power is badly distributed. I don't think there is anything in modern technology or modern technological society that leads away from decentralisation of power, quite the contrary.

About the second point, there are two aspects to that : one is the question how MIT tolerates me, and the other question is how I tolerate MIT. [Laughter.]

Well, as to how MIT tolerates me, here again, I think, one shouldn't be overly schematic. It's true that MIT is a major institution of war-research. But it's also true that it embodies very important libertarian values, which are, I think, quite deeply embedded in American society, fortunately for the world. They're not deeply embedded enough to save the Vietnamese, but they are deeply embedded enough to prevent far worse disasters.

And here, I think, one has to qualify a bit. There is imperial terror and aggression, there is exploitation, there is racism, lots of things like that. But there is also a real concern, coexisting with it, for individual rights of a sort which, for example, are embodied in the Bill of Rights, which is by no means simply an expression of class oppression. It is also an expression of the necessity to defend the individual against state power.

Now these things coexist. It's not that simple, it's not just all bad or all good. And it's the particular balance in which they coexist that makes an institute that produces weapons of war be willing to tolerate, in fact, in many ways even encourage, a person who is involved in civil disobedience against the war.

Now as to how I tolerate MIT, that raises another question. There are people who argue, and I have never understood the logic of this, that a radical ought to dissociate himself from oppressive institutions. The logic of that argument is that Karl Marx shouldn't have studied in the British Museum which, if anything, was the symbol of the most vicious imperialism in the world, the

place where all the treasures an empire had gathered from the rape of the colonies, were brought together.

But I think Karl Marx was quite right in studying in the British Museum. He was right in using the resources and in fact the liberal values of the civilisation that he was trying to overcome, against it. And I think the same applies in this case.

**QUESTION:**

But aren't you afraid that your presence at MIT gives them a clean conscience ?

**CHOMSKY:**

I don't see how, really. I mean, I think my presence at MIT serves marginally to help, I don't know how much, to increase student activism against a lot of the things that MIT as an institution does. At least I hope that's what it does.

**ELDERS:**

Is there another question ?

**QUESTION:**

I would like to get back to the question of centralisation. You said that technology does not contradict decentralisation. But the problem is, can technology criticise itself, its influences, and so forth ? Don't you think that it might be necessary to have a central organisation that could criticise the influence of technology on the whole universe ? And I don't see how that could be incorporated in a small technological institution.

**CHOMSKY:**

Well, I have nothing against the interaction of federated free associations; and in that sense centralisation, interaction, communication, argument, debate, can take place, and so on and so forth, and criticism, if you like. What I am talking about is the centralisation of power.

**QUESTION:**

But of course power is needed, for instance to forbid some technological institutions from doing work that will only benefit the corporation.

**CHOMSKY:**

Yeah, but what I'm arguing is this : if we have the choice between trusting in centralised power to make the right decision in that matter, or trusting in free associations of libertarian communities to make that decision, I would rather trust the latter. And the reason is that I think that they can serve to maximise decent human instincts, whereas a system of centralised power will tend in a general way to maximise one of the worst of human instincts, namely the instinct of rapaciousness, of destructiveness, of accumulating power to oneself and destroying others. It's a kind of instinct which does arise and functions in certain historical circumstances, and I think we want to create the kind of society where it is likely to be repressed and replaced by other and more healthy instincts.

**QUESTION:**

I hope you are right.

**ELDERS:**

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I think this must be the end of the debate. Mr. Chomsky, Mr. Foucault, I thank you very much for your far-reaching discussion over the philosophical and theoretical, as well as the political questions of the debate, both for myself and also on behalf of the audience, here and at home.

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