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# Language Development, Human Intelligence, and Social Organization

Noam Chomsky

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I would like to comment on three notions of “equality”:  
namely, equality of rights, equality of condition, and equality  
of endowment — and more generally, the nature of that  
endowment, or briefly, human nature and its variety. The  
last of these questions is essentially a matter of fact, poorly  
understood, but plainly in the domain of the natural sciences,  
to be answered, as best we can, by unprejudiced inquiry. The  
first two questions raise serious questions of value. All of  
these notions demand careful analysis, far beyond anything I  
can attempt here.

If the discussion of equality of rights and condition is to be  
at all serious — in particular, if it is to pertain to choice of ac-  
tion — then questions of fact inevitably intrude. Discussion  
becomes socially irrelevant, whatever interest it may retain as  
an intellectual exercise, to the extent that relevant facts are not  
accurately presented. In much current discussion of problems  
of equality, they are not accurately presented.

Consider, for example, a series of articles on “egalitarianism” by John Cobbs in *Business Week*, (December 1975), which is not untypical of current debate over these issues. Cobbs takes as his starting point the factual assumption that “in one way or another, all the government’s social programs are equalizers” (although, he adds, federal programs do “not always achieve this result”). Does this factual premise even approximate the truth? A strong case can be made to the contrary. Subsidies to higher education, for example, tend to be roughly proportional to family income. The enormous federal highway program has been in large measure a subsidy to commercial trucking (and, arguably, has indirectly raised the cost of living) and to major corporations that make their profits from petroleum and from modes of transportation that carry a substantial social cost. Nor can the government housing programs of the past thirty years be readily described as “equalizers.” For example, the programs that in my own city destroyed “a low-income, predominantly Italian neighborhood” on Beacon Hill and replaced it with “high-income apartment towers financed with government-insured loans” — I quote from MIT Professor of Architecture Robert Goodman in a review of federal housing programs that he describes as an “effective way of exploiting the poor.”<sup>1</sup> Or consider the government subsidies to arms producers and agribusiness, the latter in part through subsidy of research into agricultural technology designed for the interests of large corporations, which is undertaken in government-supported universities. Or consider the vast government expenditures to insure a favorable international climate for business operations. In a highly inegalitarian society, it is most unlikely that government programs will be equalizers. Rather, it is to be expected that they will be designed and manipulated by private power for its own benefits; and to a significant degree

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Goodman, *After the Planners* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971).

is a heavy responsibility that the scientist or scholar would not have to bear in a decent society, in which individuals would not relegate to authorities decisions over their lives or their beliefs. We may and should recommend the simple virtues: honesty and truthfulness, responsibility and concern. But to live by these precepts is often no simple matter.

trapped. They may quite properly dismiss the work on the grounds just sketched. But they do so in a racist society in which, furthermore, people are trained to consign questions of human and social importance to “technical experts,” who often prove to be experts in “obfuscation and defense of privilege — “experts in legitimation,” in Gramsci’s phrase. The consequences are obvious. Or they may enter the arena of argument and counterargument, thus implicitly reinforcing the belief that it makes a difference how the research comes out, and thus tacitly supporting the racist assumption on which this belief ultimately rests. Inevitably, then, by refuting alleged correlations between race and IQ (or race and X, for any X one selects), one is reinforcing racist assumptions. The dilemma is not restricted to this issue. I have discussed it elsewhere in connection with debate over murder and aggression.<sup>30</sup> In a highly ideological society, matters can hardly be otherwise, a misfortune that we may deplore but cannot easily escape.

We exist and work in given historical conditions. We may try to change them but cannot ignore them, either in the work we undertake, the strategies for social change that we advocate, or the direct action in which we engage or from which we abstain. In discussion of freedom and equality, it is very difficult to disentangle questions of fact from judgments of value. We should try to do so, pursuing factual inquiry where it may lead without dogmatic preconception, but not ignoring the consequences of what we do. We must never forget that what we do is tainted and distorted, inevitably, by the awe of expertise that is induced by social institutions as one device for enforcing passivity and obedience. What we do as scientists, as scholars, as advocates, has consequences, just as our refusal to speak or act has definite consequences. We cannot escape this condition in a society based on concentration of power and privilege. There

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<sup>30</sup> *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), introduction.

the expectation is fulfilled. It is not very likely that matters could be otherwise in the absence of mass popular organizations that are prepared to struggle for their rights and interests. An effort to develop and implement government programs that really were equalizers would lead to a form of class war, and in the present state of popular organization and distribution of effective power, there can hardly be much doubt as to who would win — a fact that some “populists,” who rightly deplore the government programs that benefit private economic power, sometimes tend to ignore.

Discussion of the role of the state in a society based on the principle of private power must not neglect the fact that “generally speaking, capitalism must be regarded as an economy of unpaid costs, ‘unpaid’ insofar as a substantial proportion of the actual costs of production remain unaccounted for in entrepreneurial outlays; instead they are shifted to, and ultimately borne by, third persons or by the community as a whole.”<sup>2</sup> A serious analysis of the government’s social programs — not to speak of its programs of economic intervention, military force, and the like — will assess the function of these programs in paying social costs that cannot realistically be relegated to a footnote. There may be a residual sense to the notion that the state serves as an equalizer, in that without its intervention the destructive forces of capitalism would demolish social existence and the physical environment, a fact that has been well understood by the masters of the private economy who have regularly called upon the state to restrain and organize these forces. But the common idea that the government acts as a social equalizer can hardly be put forth as a general principle.

As a second example, consider the widely held doctrine that moves toward equality of condition entail costs in efficiency

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<sup>2</sup> K. William Kapp, *The Social Cost of Private Enterprise, 1950* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 231.

and restrictions of freedom. The alleged inverse relation between attained equality and efficiency involves empirical claims that may or may not be true. If this relation holds, one would expect to find that worker-owned and -managed industry in egalitarian communities is less efficient than matched counterparts that are privately owned and managed and that rent labor in the so-called free market. Research on the matter is not extensive, but it tends to show that the opposite is true.<sup>3</sup> Harvard economist Stephen Marglin has argued that harsh measures were necessary in early stages of the industrial system to overcome the natural advantages of cooperative enterprise which left no room for masters, and there is a body of empirical evidence in support of the conclusion that “when workers are given control over decisions and goal setting, productivity rises dramatically.”<sup>4</sup> From another point of view, Cambridge economist J. E. Meade has argued that efficiency and equitable distribution of income can be reconciled if measures are taken “to equalize the distribution of the ownership of private property and to increase the net amount of property which was in social ownership.”<sup>5</sup> In general, the relation between equality and efficiency is hardly a simple or well-established one, despite many facile pronouncements on the matter.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Seymour Melman, “Industrial Efficiency Under Managerial Versus Cooperative Decision-making,” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Spring 1970; reprinted in B. Horvat, M. Markovic, and R. Supek, eds., *Self-Governing Socialism*, vol. 2 (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975). See also Melman, *Decision-Making and Productivity* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1958); and Paul Blumberg, *Industrial Democracy: The Sociology of Participation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen A. Marglin, “What Do Bosses Do?” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Summer 1974; Herbert Gintis, “Alienation in Capitalist Society,” in R. C. Edwards, M. Reich, and T. E. Weiskopf, *The Capitalist System* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> J. E. Meade, *Efficiency, Equality and the Ownership of Property* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

lauded for their courage and honesty. No one would be so vulgar as to observe that the editors and the ambassador, in the not very distant past, have supported racist murder on a scale that exceeds Amin’s wildest fantasies. The general failure to be appalled by their hypocritical pronouncements reflects, in the first place, the extremely powerful ideological controls that prevent us from coming to terms with our acts and their significance and, in the second place, the nation’s profound commitment to racist principle. The victims of our Asian wars were never regarded as fully human, a fact that can be demonstrated all too easily, to our everlasting shame. As for domestic racism, I need hardly comment.

The scientist, like anyone else, is responsible for the foreseeable consequences of his acts. The point is obvious and generally well understood; consider the conditions on the use of human subjects in experiments. In the present case, an inquiry into race and IQ, regardless of its outcome, will have a severe social cost in a racist society, for the reasons just noted. The scientist who undertakes this inquiry must therefore show that its significance is so great as to outweigh these costs. If, for example, one maintains that this inquiry is justified by the possibility that it may lead to some refinement of social science methodology, as argued by Boston University President John Silber (*Encounter*, August 1974), he provides an insight into his moral calculus: the possible contribution to research methodology outweighs the social cost of the study of race and IQ in a racist society. Such advocates often seem to believe that they are defending academic freedom, but this is just a muddle. The issue of freedom of research arises here in its conventional form: does the research in question carry costs, and if so, are they outweighed by its significance? The scientist has no unique right to ignore the likely consequences of what he does.

Once the issue of race and IQ is raised, people who perceive and are concerned by its severe social cost are, in a sense,

between measurable and significant traits, say, eye color and length of the big toe. It is difficult to see how the study of race and IQ, for example, can be justified on any scientific grounds.

Since the inquiry has no scientific significance and no social significance, apart from the racist assumption that individuals must be regarded not as what they are but rather as standing at the mean of their race category, it follows that it has no merit at all. The question then arises, Why is it pursued with such zeal? Why is it taken seriously? Attention naturally turns to the racist assumptions that do confer some importance on the inquiry, if they are accepted.

In a racist society, inquiry into race and IQ can be expected to reinforce prejudice, pretty much independent of the outcome of the inquiry. Given such concepts as “race” and “IQ,” it is to be expected that the results of any inquiry will be obscure and conflicting, the arguments complex and difficult for the layman to follow. For the racist, the judgment “Not proven” will be read, “Probably so.” There will be ample scope for the racist to wallow in his prejudices. The very fact that the inquiry is undertaken suggests that its outcome is of some importance, and since it is important only on racist assumptions, these assumptions are insinuated even when they are not expressed. For such reasons as these, a scientific investigation of genetic characteristics of Jews would have been appalling in Nazi Germany. There can be no doubt that the investigation of race and IQ has been extremely harmful to the victims of American racism. I have heard black educators describe in vivid terms the suffering and injury imposed on children who are made to understand that “science” has demonstrated this or that about their race, or even finds it necessary to raise the question.

We cannot ignore the fact that we live in a profoundly racist society, though we like to forget that this is so. When the *New York Times* editors and U.N. Ambassador Moynihan castigate Idi Amin of Uganda as a “racist murderer,” perhaps correctly, there is a surge of pride throughout the country and they are

Turning to the relation between equality and freedom, allegedly inverse, we also find nontrivial questions. Workers’ control of production certainly increases freedom along some dimensions — extremely important ones, in my judgment — just as it eliminates the fundamental inequality between the person compelled to sell his labor power to survive and the person privileged to purchase it, if he so chooses. At the very least, we should bear in mind the familiar observation that freedom is illusion and mockery when conditions for the exercise of free choice do not exist. We only enter Marx’s “realm of freedom” when labor is no longer “determined by necessity and mundane considerations,”<sup>6</sup> an insight that is hardly the precept of radicals and revolutionaries alone. Thus Vico observed that there is no liberty when people are “drowned ... in a sea of usury” and must “pay off their debts by work and toil.”<sup>7</sup> David Ellerman puts the issue well in an important essay:

It is a veritable mainstay of capitalist thought (not to mention so-called “right-wing libertarianism”) that the moral flaws of chattel slavery have not survived in capitalism since the workers, unlike the slaves, are free people making voluntary wage contracts. But it is only that, in the case of capitalism, the denial of natural rights is less complete so that the worker has a residual legal personality as a free “commodity-owner.” He is thus allowed to voluntarily put his own working life to traffic. When a robber denies another person’s right to make an infinite number of other choices besides losing his money or his life and the denial is backed up by a gun, then this

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961).

is clearly robbery even though it might be said that the victim is making a “voluntary choice” between his remaining options. When the legal system itself denies the natural rights of working people in the name of the prerogatives of capital, and this denial is sanctioned by the legal violence of the state, then the theorists of ‘libertarian’ capitalism do not proclaim institutional robbery, but rather they celebrate the “natural liberty” of working people to choose between the remaining options of selling their labor as a commodity and being unemployed.<sup>8</sup>

Considering such questions as these, we can hardly rest comfortably with the assumption that freedom declines as equality — for example, in control over resources and means of production — increases. It may be true that equality is inversely related to the freedom to dispose of and make use of property under the social arrangements of capitalism, but the latter condition is not to be simply identified as “freedom.”

I do not even consider here the immeasurable loss incurred when a person is converted to a tool of production, so that, as Adam Smith, phrased it, he “has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention” and “he naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become,” his mind falling “into that drowsy stupidity, which, in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of almost all the inferior ranks of people.”<sup>9</sup> What is the loss in “efficiency” and social product resulting from this enforced

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<sup>8</sup> David Ellerman, “Capitalism and Workers’ Self-Management,” in G. Hunnius, G. D. Garson, and J. Case, eds., *Workers’ Control* (New York: Random House, 1973). PP- 1°-11-

<sup>9</sup> Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, cited by Marglin, “What Do Bosses Do?”

which, furthermore, do not seem particularly plausible. I have discussed the matter elsewhere and will not pursue it here.<sup>29</sup>

Suppose that inquiry into human nature reveals that human cognitive capacities are highly structured by our genetic program and that there are variations among individuals within a shared framework. This seems to me an entirely reasonable expectation and a situation much to be desired. It has no implications with regard to equality of rights or condition, so far as I can see, beyond those already sketched.

Consider finally the question of race and intellectual endowments. Notice again that in a decent society there would be no social consequences to any discovery that might be made about this question. Individuals are what they are; it is only on racist assumptions that they are to be regarded as an instance of their race category, so that social consequences ensue from the discovery that the mean for a certain racial category with respect to some capacity is such and such. Eliminating racist assumptions, the facts have no social consequences whatever they may be, and are therefore not worth knowing, from this point of view at least. If there is any purpose to investigation of the relation between race and some capacity, it must derive from the scientific significance of the question. It is difficult to be precise about questions of scientific merit. Roughly, an inquiry has scientific merit if its results might bear on some general principles of science. One doesn’t conduct inquiries into the density of blades of grass on various lawns or innumerable other trivial and pointless questions. But inquiry into such questions as race and IQ appears to be of virtually no scientific interest. Conceivably, there might be some interest in correlations between partially heritable traits, but if someone were interested in this question, he would surely not select such characteristics as race and IQ, each an obscure amalgam of complex properties. Rather, he would ask whether there is a correlation

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. my *For Reasons of State*, chap. 7.

whatever measure and manner I am able to do. Human talents vary considerably, within a fixed framework that is characteristic of the species and that permits ample scope for creative work, including the creative work of appreciating the achievements of others. This should be a matter for delight rather than a condition to be abhorred. Those who assume otherwise must be adopting the tacit premise that people's rights or social reward are somehow contingent on their abilities. As for human rights, there is an element of plausibility in this assumption in the single respect already noted: in a decent society, opportunities should conform as far as possible to personal needs, and such needs may be specialized and related to particular talents and capacities. My pleasure in life is enhanced by the fact that others can do many things that I cannot, and I see no reason to want to deny these people the opportunity to cultivate their talents, consistent with general social needs. Difficult questions of practice are sure to arise in any functioning social group, but I see no problem of principle.

As for social rewards, it is alleged that in our society remuneration correlates in part with IQ. But insofar as that is true, it is simply a social malady to be overcome much as slavery had to be eliminated at an earlier stage of human history. It is sometimes argued that constructive and creative work will cease unless it leads to material reward, so that all of society gains when the talented receive special rewards. For the mass of the population, then, the message is: "You're better off if you're poor." One can see why this doctrine would appeal to the privileged, but it is difficult to believe that it could be put forth seriously by anyone who has had experience with creative work or workers in the arts, the sciences, crafts, or whatever. The standard arguments for "meritocracy" have no basis in fact or logic, to my knowledge; they rest on a priori beliefs,

stupidity? What does it mean to say that a person driven to such "drowsy stupidity" by his conditions of work still remains "free"?

When we ask ourselves what would be a just and decent society, we are faced by conflicting intuitions, standards that are imprecise and poorly formulated, and significant questions of fact. Relying on some of these intuitions to the exclusion of others, we may seem to escape complexity and conflict, but at the risk of pursuing a mere logical exercise, and not a very interesting one at that. The hazards are well illustrated by some contemporary discussion. Consider, for example, the "entitlement theory of justice," now enjoying a certain vogue. According to this theory, a person has a right to whatever he has acquired by means that are just. If, by luck or labor or ingenuity, a person acquires such and such, then he is entitled to keep it and dispose of it as he wills, and a just society will not infringe on this right.

One can easily determine where such a principle might lead. It is entirely possible that by legitimate means — say, luck supplemented by contractual arrangements "freely undertaken" under pressure of need — one person might gain control of the necessities of life. Others are then free to sell themselves to this person as slaves, if he is willing to accept them. Otherwise, they are free to perish. Without extra question-begging conditions, the society is just.

The argument has all the merits of a proof that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . Presented with such a proof, we may be sufficiently intrigued to try to find the source of error in faulty reasoning or incorrect assumptions. Or, we may disregard it and proceed to more important matters. In a field with real intellectual substance, such as mathematics, it may be interesting, and has in the past really proven fruitful, to pursue such questions. In considering the problems of society and human life, the enterprise is of dubious value. Suppose that some concept of a "just society" is advanced that fails to characterize the situation just described

as unjust, to an extreme (however the outcome may have come about). Then one of two conclusions is in order. We may conclude that the concept is simply unimportant and of no interest as a guide to thought or action, since it fails to apply properly even in such an elementary case as this. Or we may conclude that the concept advanced is to be dismissed in that it fails to correspond to the pretheoretical notion that it intends to capture in clear cases. If our intuitive concept of justice is clear enough to rule social arrangements of the sort described as grossly unjust, then the sole interest of a demonstration that this outcome might be “just” under a given “theory of justice” lies in the inference by *reductio ad absurdum* to the conclusion that the theory is hopelessly inadequate. While it may capture some partial intuition regarding justice, it evidently neglects others.

The real question to be raised about theories that fail so completely to capture the concept of justice in its significant and intuitive sense is why they arouse such interest. Why are they not simply dismissed out of hand on grounds of this failure, which is so striking in clear cases? Perhaps the answer is, in part, the one given by Edward Greenberg in a discussion of some recent work on the entitlement theory of justice. After reviewing empirical and conceptual shortcomings, he observes that such work “plays an important function in the process of... ‘blaming the victim,’ and of protecting property against egalitarian onslaughts by various non-property groups.”<sup>10</sup> An ideological defense of privileges, exploitation, and private power will be welcomed, regardless of its merits.

These matters are of no small importance to poor and oppressed people here and elsewhere. Forms of social control that sufficed to ensure obedience in an expanding economy have lost their efficacy in times of stagnation. Ideas that circu-

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<sup>10</sup> Edward S. Greenberg, “In Defense of Avarice,” *Social Policy*, January-February 1976, p. 63.

the character of their mental organs and the physical structures on which they are based?

Inquiry into specific cognitive capacities such as the language faculty leads to specific and I think significant hypotheses concerning the genetically programmed schematism for language, but gives us no evidence concerning variability. Perhaps this is a result of the inadequacy of our analytic tools. Or it may be that the basic capacities are truly invariant, apart from gross pathology. We find that over a very broad range, at least, there are no differences in the ability to acquire and make effective use of human language at some level of detail, although there may be differences in what is acquired, as there are evidently differences in facility of use. I see no reason for dogmatism on this score. So little is known concerning other cognitive capacities that we can hardly even speculate. Experience seems to support the belief that people do vary in their intellectual capacities and their specialization. It would hardly come as a surprise if this were so, assuming that we are dealing with biological structures, however intricate and remarkable, of known sorts.

Many people, particularly those who regard themselves as within the left-liberal political spectrum, find such conclusions repugnant. It may be that the empty organism hypothesis is so attractive to the left in part because it precludes these possibilities; there is no variability in a null endowment. But I find it difficult to understand why conclusions of this sort should be at all disturbing. I am personally quite convinced that no matter what training or education I might have received, I could never have run a four-minute mile, discovered Godel’s theorems, composed a Beethoven quartet, or risen to any of innumerable other heights of human achievement. I feel in no way demeaned by these inadequacies. It is quite enough that I am capable, as I think any person of normal endowments probably is, of appreciating and in part understanding what others have accomplished, while making my own personal contributions in



and explanatory power, as to the general character of the genetic program that provides for the growth of the capacity for language and the particular forms that it assumes. I see no reason to doubt that the same will prove true in other domains, as we come to understand the structure of human cognitive capacity. If so, we may think of human nature as a system of a sort familiar in the biological world: a system of “mental organs” based on physical mechanisms that are now largely unknown, though not beyond investigation in principle, a system that provides for a unique form of intelligence that manifests itself in human language; in our unique capacity to develop a concept of number and abstract space<sup>28</sup>; to construct scientific theories in certain domains; to create certain systems of art, myth, and ritual, to interpret human actions, to develop and comprehend certain systems of social institutions, and so on.

On an “empty organism” hypothesis, human beings are assuredly equal in intellectual endowments. More accurately, they are equal in their incapacity to develop complex cognitive structures of the characteristically human sort. If we assume, however, that this biologically given organism has its special capacities like any other, and that among them are the capacities to develop human cognitive structures with their specific properties, then the possibility arises that there are differences among individuals in their higher mental functions. Indeed, it would be surprising if there were not, if cognitive faculties such as the language faculty are really “mental organs.” People obviously differ in their physical characteristics and capacities; why should there not be genetically determined differences in

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<sup>28</sup> It is extremely misleading to argue, as some do, that certain birds have an elementary “concept of number” as revealed by their ability to employ ordinal and visually presented systems up to some finite limit (about 7). The concepts one, two ... seven are not to be confused with the concept of natural number, as formally captured, e.g., by the Dedekind-Peano axioms and intuitively understood, without difficulty, by normal humans, as an infinite system.

late in the faculty club and executive suite can be transmuted into ideological instruments to confuse and demoralize. Furthermore, in 1976 we can hardly ignore the fact that the power of the American state has been employed, on a massive scale, to impose capitalist social forms and ideological principles on unwilling and resisting victims throughout the world. Academic ideologists and political commentators in the media may choose to interpret history in other terms, but the business press is considerably more accurate in observing that the “stable world order for business operations,” “the international economic structure, under which U.S. companies have flourished since the end of World War II,” has been dependent on the organized violence of the state: “No matter how negative a development, there was always the umbrella of American power to contain it,” though in the world after Vietnam, they fear, this may no longer be so.<sup>11</sup>

I once visited a village in Laos in the midst of which there was a pleasant lake that had, at one time, served as the water supply for the village and a place where villagers could relax and enjoy themselves. One powerful individual had succeeded in gaining control of all access to the lake, now fenced off. To obtain water, villagers had to trudge several miles. They could see the lake beyond the fence, but it was no longer available to them. Suppose that ownership of that lake had been attained by means that were “just,” as certainly might have been the case in principle.<sup>12</sup> Would we then conclude that the village was a “just society,” in this respect? Would we seriously urge the villagers to accept this consequence as only right and just? The government backed — it would be more accurate to say imposed — by the United States implicitly took that position. The Pathet Lao organized the peasants of Laos to overcome

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<sup>11</sup> “The Fearful Drift of Foreign Policy,” Commentary, *Business Week*, April 7, 1975-

<sup>12</sup> In fact, in this case, sheer robbery backed by state power is a more likely explanation.

such forms of “justice.” So substantial was their success that the United States government undertook to demolish much of rural Laos in a war that was “secret,” in that the free press in our free society freely chose to keep it secret for a long period while thousands of peasants were murdered and dispossessed. We now freely choose to forget what has happened and erase it from history, or to dismiss it as an unfortunate though minor incident, an example, of our “blundering efforts to do good,” our “good intentions” mysteriously transmuted into “bad policy” through our ignorance, error, and naivete.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the question of “justice,” in crucial cases such as this one, is by no means abstract and remote, and we would do well to think seriously about it.

Similar questions arise in a stark form in our own society, one that has a substantial degree of freedom, by world standards. For example, we have free access to information, in principle. In the case of the secret war in Laos, it was possible to ascertain the facts — much too late — by visiting the country, speaking to people in refugee camps, reading reports in the foreign press and ultimately even our own. But freedom of that sort, though important for the privileged, is socially rather meaningless. For the mass of the population of the United States, there was no possibility, in the real world, to gain access to that information, let alone to comprehend its significance. The distribution of power and privilege effectively limits the access to information and the ability to escape the framework of doctrine imposed by ideological institutions: the mass media, the journals of opinion, the schools and universities. The same is true in every domain. In principle, we have a variety of important rights under the law. But we also

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<sup>13</sup> On the interpretation of the “lessons of Vietnam” by academic scholars and liberal commentators as the war ended, see my “Remaking of History,” *Ramparts*, September 1975 (reprinted in *Towards a New Cold War* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1982]), and “The United States and Vietnam,” *Vietnam Quarterly*, no. 1, (Winter 1976).

be quite impossible to account for the richness and complexity of human cognitive systems and the uniformity of their growth, not to speak of the remarkable qualitative differences as compared with other species. Surely, no evidence or argument has been adduced in support of the belief that the human brain is so markedly distinct from every other structure known to us in the natural world, and it is perhaps a bit ironic that such views are proposed, not only on the left, as if they were an outgrowth of some kind of scientific naturalism. Exactly the contrary seems to me to be the case. The human brain is unique in many respects, and the mental structures that grow under the boundary conditions set by experience — the cognitive structures that are “learned,” to employ the common and I think rather misleading locution — also provide humans with a “unique instrument.” But it is difficult to imagine that this “uniqueness” resides in the total absence of structure, despite the antiquity of such a belief and its remarkable grip on the modern imagination. What little we know about the human brain and about human cognitive structures suggests a very different assumption: a highly constrained genetic program determines the basic structural properties of our “mental organs,” thus making it possible for us to attain rich and intricate systems of knowledge and belief in a uniform manner on the basis of quite limited evidence. I might add that such a view comes as no surprise to biologists, particularly, as regards human language.<sup>27</sup> And I believe it would generally be regarded by neurophysiologists as entirely natural, if not almost obvious.

We need not rest with qualitative and vague remarks such as these. In the study of human language, at least, there are substantive hypotheses, which I believe have considerable force

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<sup>27</sup> Cf., for example, the remarks on language in Luria, *op. cit.*; Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); and Francois Jacob, *The Logic of Life*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973). For some recent discussion of this issue, see my *Reflections on Language*.

nature. When a modern Marxist thinker such as Antonio Gramsci, for example, argues that “the fundamental innovation introduced by Marxism into the science of politics and history is the proof that there does not exist an abstract, fixed and immutable ‘human nature’ ... but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations,”<sup>25</sup> he is referring, of course, not to human physical organs in general but to one specific organ, the human brain and its creations. The content of this doctrine must be that at least so far as the higher mental functions are concerned, the human brain is unique among the systems known to us in the natural world in that it has no genetically determined structure, but is, in effect, a *tabula rasa* on which the totality of historically determined social relations is then inscribed. For some segments of the left, there has been an extraordinary compulsion to adopt some such view. In a report on a recent discussion at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Walter Sullivan writes:

The most extreme view, expressed by some members of the audience, was that human brains were ‘uncoupled’ from any genetic influences whatsoever — that, like computers built to a standard design, their relative levels of performance were completely determined by programming.<sup>26</sup>

As scientific hypotheses, these assumptions, which are familiar from radical behaviorism as well, seem to me to have little to recommend them. On these assumptions, it would

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<sup>25</sup> See my *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975) for reference and discussion.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Sullivan, “Scientists Debate Question of Race and Intelligence,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1976, p. 23. His account may well be accurate; I have often heard and read similar comments from left-wing scientists.

know just how much these mean, in practice, to people who are unable to purchase them. We have the right of free expression, though some can shout louder than others, by reason of power, wealth, and privilege. We can defend our legal rights through the courts — insofar as we understand these rights and can afford the costs. All of this is obvious and hardly worth extended comment. In a perfectly functioning capitalist democracy, with no illegitimate abuse of power, freedom will be in effect a kind of commodity; effectively, a person will have as much of it as he can buy. We readily understand why the powerful and the privileged often rise to the defense of personal freedom, of which they are the chief beneficiaries in practice, though they manage to look the other way when, for example, the national political police-become involved in political assassination and destruction of political groups that attempt to organize among the poor, as happened in Chicago not very long ago, to the resounding silence of the national press and journals of opinion.<sup>14</sup>

I have only barely touched on some of the questions that arise when we consider problems of equality and freedom. I have as yet said nothing at all about the third notion of equality, namely, “equality of endowment.” Here, too, there is a widely held doctrine that deserves examination. Again, it is expressed clearly by John Cobbs. He poses what he takes to be “the great intellectual dilemma of the egalitarians,” namely, that “a look at the real world demonstrates that some men are smarter than others.” Is it fair to insist, he asks, that “the fast and slow ... should all arrive at the same condition at the same time?” Is it fair to insist on equality of condition achieved, when natural endowment so plainly varies?

Presumably it is the case that in our “real world” some combination of attributes is conducive to success in responding to

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this topic, see my introduction to N. Blackstock, ed., *Cointelpro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

“the demands of the economic system.” Let us agree, for the sake of discussion, that this combination of attributes is in part a matter of native endowment. Why does this (alleged) fact pose an “intellectual dilemma” to egalitarians? Note that we can hardly claim much insight into just what the relevant combination of attributes may be. I know of no reason to believe, and do not believe, that “being smart” has much to do with it. One might suppose that some mixture of avarice, selfishness, lack of concern for others, aggressiveness, and similar characteristics play a part in getting ahead and “making it” in a competitive society based on capitalist principles. Others may counter with their own prejudices. Whatever the correct collection of attributes may be, we may ask what follows from the fact, if it is a fact, that some partially inherited combination of attributes tends to lead to material success? All that follows, so far as I can see, is a comment on our particular social and economic arrangements. One can easily imagine a society in which physical prowess, willingness to murder, ability to cheat, and so on, would tend to bring success; we hardly need resort to imagination. The egalitarian might respond, in all such cases, that the social order should be changed so that the collection of attributes that tends to bring success will no longer do so. He might even argue that in a more decent society, the attributes that now lead to success would be recognized as pathological, and that gentle persuasion might be a proper means to help people to overcome their unfortunate malady. Again we return to the question: What is a just and decent social order? The “egalitarian” faces no special “intellectual dilemmas” distinct in character from those that confront the advocates of a different social order.

A standard response is that it is just “human nature” to pursue power and material interest by any means so long as one can get away with it. Let us suppose that human nature is such that under given social conditions these admirable traits manifest themselves, or more accurately, that people with such ten-

creation can take place only under conditions of free choice that goes beyond “instruction and guidance,” in a society in which social fetters have been replaced by freely created social bonds. Or suppose that we assume further with Marx that “only in a state of community with others has each individual the means to develop his predispositions in all directions; only in a state of community will personal freedom thus become possible” — where personal freedom presupposes abolition of the alienation of labor that Humboldt condemned as well, the condition of labor that “casts some of the workers back into barbarous kind of work and turns others into machines.”<sup>21</sup> On such assumptions about human needs we derive a very different conception of a social order that we should work to create.

Some Marxists have taken the view that “man has no essence apart from his historical existence,”<sup>22</sup> that “human nature is not something *fixed by nature*, but, on the contrary, a ‘nature’ which is *made by man* in his acts of ‘self-transcendence’ as a natural being.”<sup>23</sup> This interpretation derives from Marx’s dictum that “the nature which comes to be in human history — the genesis of human society — is man’s real nature,”<sup>24</sup> and other similar remarks. Even if we adopt this view, it still remains true that the next step in social change should seek to provide the conditions for the “real nature” that can be expressed at a given stage of historical and cultural evolution.

Is it true that human nature is in no way “fixed by nature”? Evidently it is not true of the physical components of human

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<sup>21</sup> For references and discussions, see note 17; also, Frank E. Manuel, “In Memoriam: Critique of the Gotha Program, 1875–1975,” *Daedalus*, Winter 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Fredy Perlman, *Essay on Commodity Fetishism*, 1968, reprinted from *Telos*, no. 6 (Somerville, Mass.: New England Free Press, 1968); .

<sup>23</sup> Istvan Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1970^.

<sup>24</sup> Cited by Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*.

thought and emotion, for creation of art and science, for planning actions and assessing their consequences over a hitherto inconceivable range. It is often assumed, quite plausibly, that in the development of this unique instrument, the human mind, “the critical step must have been the invention of language.”<sup>20</sup> In some manner that is still poorly understood, genetic endowment was modified to produce a creature that grows a human language as part of a system of “mental organs,” a creature that can then proceed to create the conditions under which it will live to an extent without significant analogue in the natural world, so far as we know.

The question “What is human nature?” has more than scientific interest. As we have noted, it lies at the core of social thought as well. What is a good society? Presumably, one that leads to the satisfaction of intrinsic human needs, insofar as material conditions allow. To command attention and respect, a social theory should be grounded on some concept of human needs and human rights, and in turn, on the human nature that must be presupposed in any serious account of the origin and character of these needs and rights. Correspondingly, the social structures and relations that a reformer or revolutionary seeks to bring into existence will be based on a concept of human nature, however vague and inarticulate.

Suppose that at the core of human nature lies the propensity to truck and barter, as Adam Smith alleged. Then we will work to achieve an early capitalist society of small traders, unhindered by monopoly, state intervention, or socially controlled production. Suppose, in contrast, that we take seriously the concepts of another classical liberal thinker, Wilhelm von Humboldt, who contends that “to inquire and to create — these are the centers around which all human pursuits more or less directly revolve,” and who further maintains that true

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<sup>20</sup> Quotes are from Salvador E. Luria, *Life: The Unfinished Experiment* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1973).

dencies will prosper. Suppose further that wealth and power, once attained, can be employed to extend and protect such privilege, as has been the case under industrial capitalism. The obvious question, of course, is whether other social arrangements might be brought into being that would not encourage these tendencies but would rather be conducive to the flourishing of other traits that are no less part of our common nature: solidarity, concern, sympathy, and kindness, for example.

Discussion of egalitarian views is often misleading, in that the criticism of such views is commonly directed against a straw-man opponent, as egalitarians have been quick to point out.<sup>15</sup> In fact, “equality of condition,” much deplored by contemporary ideologists, has rarely been the express goal of reformers or revolutionaries, at least on the left. In Marx’s utopia, “the development of human energy” is to be taken as “an end in itself as humans escape the “realm of necessity” so that questions of freedom can be seriously raised. The guiding principle, reiterated to the point of cliché, is: “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” The principle of “equality of condition” is nowhere invoked. If one person needs medical treatment and another is more fortunate, they are not to be granted an equal amount of medical care, and the same is true of other human needs.

Libertarian socialists who objected to the theory of proletarian dictatorship also saw little merit in “egalitarianism” as such and in fact condemned “authoritarian Socialism” for failing to comprehend that “Socialism will be free or it will not be at all”:

In the prison, in the cloister, or in the barracks one finds a fairly high degree of economic equality, as all the inmates are provided with the same dwelling, the same food, the same uniform, and the same tasks. The ancient Inca state in Peru and

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Herbert J. Gans, “About the Equalitarians,” *Columbia Forum*, Spring 1975.

the Jesuit state in Paraguay had brought equal economic provision for every inhabitant to a fixed system, but in spite of this the vilest despotism prevailed there, and the human being was merely the automaton of a higher will on whose decisions he had not the slightest influence. It was not without reason that Proudhon saw in a “Socialism” without freedom the worst form of slavery. The urge for social justice can only develop properly and be effective when it grows out of a man’s sense of freedom and responsibility, and is based upon it.<sup>16</sup>

For Rocker, anarchism was “voluntary socialism,” and “freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all capacities and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account.” Marx would not have disagreed, and the basic conceptions can be traced back to earlier libertarian thought.<sup>17</sup> These ideas deserve close attention as the most serious expression, in my view, of a concept of a just and decent society that incorporates serious and critical principles while attending to significant social and historical facts.

Note that for such socialists as Marx, Bakunin, Rocker, and others of the left, there is no “intellectual dilemma” arising from inequality of endowment. Libertarian socialists, at least, looked forward to a “federation of free communities which shall be bound to one another by their common economic and social interests and arrange their affairs by mutual agreement and free contract,” “a free association of all productive forces

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<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Rocker, “Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism,” in P. Eltzbacher, ed., *Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1960), pp. 234–35.

<sup>17</sup> I have discussed some of the roots of these doctrines elsewhere: e.g., *For Reasons of State* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973). See the two preceding chapters.

of dualist theory. One might argue, say on Cartesian grounds, that humans and humans alone possess some nonmaterial quality — Cartesian mind; and yet one might maintain, as I think the Cartesians would have done, that there can be a science of mind. But putting this issue aside, there are quite unique properties of human intelligence, elements of distinctive human nature. Assuming no a priori limits to inquiry, it is an empirical question, a question of science, to determine what human nature may be.

The puzzlement of our hypothetical Martian observer, with regard to the uniqueness of the human species, would perhaps mount if he knew a little modern biology. Thus it seems to be the case that the quantity of DNA in the fertilized egg is not very different for a mouse, a cow, a chimpanzee, or a person. Structural differences revealed only at a more refined level of analysis are evidently responsible for the precise course and character of embryological development. In a complex and intricate system, small differences in initial condition may have major consequences for the form, size, structure, and function of the resulting organism and its components. The same phenomenon is a commonplace in the natural sciences. It can also be easily demonstrated in the investigation of a system of the intricacy of human language. Given a linguistic theory of sufficient range and complexity, it is easy to show that small modifications in general conditions imposed on rules may lead to very curious and varied changes among predicted phenomena, because of the complex interactions that take place as a sentence is generated by a system of rules operating under these conditions. Assuming that modern biology is essentially on the right track, it must be that natural selection gave rise somehow to a particular quality of genetic complexity, producing “a new force: the human mind,” a “unique instrument [that] gave for the first time to a biological species the power to alter its relation to the environment ... by conscious manipulation of the surrounding world,” as well as the means for expression of

some consequences or at least be suggestive with regard to questions of human and social import? In principle, we enter at this point into the domain of scientific inquiry, though it is potential rather than actual science.

The proposition that humans differ in fundamental respects from other organisms in the natural world is hardly open to serious dispute. If a Martian scientist were to study earthly matters, he would have little doubt on this score. The conclusion would be particularly obvious if he were to observe changes in the life of organisms over an extended period. The humans of today are, with at most minor modifications, of the same genetic constitution as their forebears many millennia ago, but patterns of life have changed remarkably, particularly in the past few hundred years. This is not true of other organisms, except as a result of human intervention. A Martian observer would also be struck by the fact that at any moment of history there are remnants of earlier ways, even of Stone Age conditions, among humans who do not differ significantly in genetic constitution from those whose mode of life has changed most radically. He would note, in short, that humans are unique in the natural world in that they have a history, cultural diversity, and cultural evolution. In these respects, our hypothetical Martian might well be intrigued by the question, "Why is this so?"

The same question has, of course, been raised in one or another form since the earliest recorded origins of human thought. That is natural enough. Humans naturally seek to define their place in the world of nature. The question, "What is human nature?", the collection of attributes that so radically distinguish the human species from the rest of the organic world, is a profound and essentially unanswered question of science. It has been held to lie beyond the range of scientific inquiry, in that the specific difference of humans lies in their possession of an immortal soul that cannot be further understood by the methods of science. We might note that the inaccessibility of the soul to study is no essential conclusion

based upon co-operative labor, which would have for its sole purpose the satisfying of the necessary requirements of every member of society."<sup>18</sup> In such a society, there is no reason why rewards should be contingent on some collection of personal attributes, however selected. Inequality of endowment is simply the human condition — a fact for which we may be thankful; one vision of hell is a society of interchangeable parts. It carries with it no implications concerning social rewards.

In a socialist society, as envisioned by the authentic left,<sup>19</sup> a central purpose will be that the necessary requirements of every member of society be satisfied. We may assume that these "necessary requirements" will be historically conditioned in part, and will develop along with the expansion and enrichment of material and intellectual culture. But "equality of condition" is no desideratum, as we approach Marx's "realm of freedom." Individuals will differ in their aspirations, their abilities, and their personal goals. For some person, the opportunity to play the piano ten hours a day may be an overwhelming personal need; for another, not. As material circumstances permit, these differential needs should be satisfied in a decent society, as in healthy family life. In functioning socialist societies such as the Israeli kibbutzim, questions of this sort constantly arise. I cannot imagine that it is possible to formulate very strong general principles to resolve conflicts and measure individual opportunity against social demands. Honest people

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<sup>18</sup> Rocker, *op. cit.*, p. 228. Rocker is characterizing the "ideology of anarchism." Whether Marx would have welcomed such a conception is a matter of conjecture. As a theoretician of capitalism, he did not have very much to say about the nature of a socialist society. Anarchists, who tended to the view that the workers' organizations must create "not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself within capitalist society (Bakunin), correspondingly provided a more extensive theory of postrevolutionary society. For a left-Marxist view of these questions, see Karl Korsch, "On Socialization," in Horvat et al, *op. cit.*, vol. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Evidently there is a value judgement here, for which I do not apologize.

will differ in their assessments and will try to reach agreement through discussion and sympathetic consideration of the needs of others. The problems are not exotic ones; they arise constantly in functioning social groups, such as the family. We are not accustomed to think beyond such small groups, given the inhuman and pathological premises of competitive capitalism and its perverse ideology. It is no wonder that “fraternity” has traditionally been inscribed on the revolutionary banner alongside of “liberty” and “equality.” Without bonds of solidarity, sympathy, and concern for others, a socialist society is unthinkable. We may only hope that human nature is so constituted that these elements of our essential nature may flourish and enrich our lives, once the social conditions that suppress them are overcome. Socialists are committed to the belief that we are not condemned to live in a society based on greed, envy, and hate. I know of no way to prove that they are right, but there are also no grounds for the common belief that they must be wrong.

The distinction between equality of condition and equality of rights loses its apparent sharpness when we attend to it more closely. Suppose that individuals, at each stage of their personal existence, are to be accorded their intrinsic human rights; in this sense, “equality of rights” is to be upheld. Then conditions must be such that they can enjoy these rights. To the extent that inequality of condition impairs the exercise of these rights, it is illegitimate and is to be overcome, in a decent society. What, then, are these rights? If they include the right to develop one’s capacities to the fullest, to realize what Marx calls the “species character” of “free conscious activity” and “productive life” in free associations based on constructive, creative work, then conditions must be equalized at least to the rather considerable extent required to guarantee these rights, if equality of rights is to be maintained. The vision of the left, then, blurs the distinction between equality of rights and condition, denies that inequality of endowment merits or demands corre-

sponding inequality of reward, rejects equality of condition as a principle in itself, and sees no intellectual dilemma in the conflict between egalitarian principles, properly understood, and variability of endowment. Rather we must face the problems of a repressive and unjust society, emerging with greater clarity as we progress beyond the realm of necessity.

Criticism of egalitarianism misfires when directed against at least this segment of the left. But one may legitimately raise other questions. Thus it might be argued that the intuitions that lead to this vision of a decent and just society conflict with others: for example, the belief that one must pay for one’s sins or errors. Or it might be argued that all of this is utopian nonsense, and that wage slavery and authoritarian structures such as the modern business enterprise are an inescapable necessity in a complex society. Or one may consider a more limited time frame and work for “more equality” and “more justice,” putting aside the question of further goals and the principles that inspire them. Here we enter the grounds of legitimate and useful controversy. For example, if an argument can be constructed that advanced industrial societies cannot survive unless some people rent themselves to others, some people give orders while others march to the beat of a drum, then it should be taken seriously. If correct, it undermines the socialist vision. But the burden of proof rests on those who insist that some fundamental conditions of repression, exploitation, or inequality are inescapable. To say merely that things have never been otherwise is not very convincing. On these grounds, one could have demonstrated, in the eighteenth century, that capitalist democracy is an impossible dream.

Can we seriously raise the question “What is human nature?” Can we make some progress toward the understanding of human nature? Can we develop a theory of intrinsic human needs, of the nature of human capacities and their variation in the species, of the forms these capacities will assume under varied social conditions, a theory that will have