

Chomsky and Foucault on Human Nature and Politics: An Essential Difference?

Foucault: "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 realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and that 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."¹

"Any serious social science or theory of social change must be founded on some concept of human nature." — Noam Chomsky²

1. Introduction

In 1971, Dutch television held a series of interviews and discussions with noted intellectuals of the day to discuss a wide range of issues regarding contemporary social and philosophical affairs. Perhaps the most significant of these encounters was the meeting between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault. It brought together arguably the two most prominent Western intellectual-activists of the day in a debate that illustrates clearly the lineage of thought within which each writer is situated. Nominally the discussion was in two parts: the first an examination of the origins or production of knowledge, with particular concern for the natural sciences, the second explicitly focused on the role and practice of oppositional politics within Western capitalist democracies—in part a response to the unfolding Vietnam War.

As a glance at the transcript of the discussion between Chomsky and Foucault reveals, the debate was a fascinating insight into many features of their work, and there is far too much of interest in the discussion to be conveyed within the limits of a single article. While the discussion raises much of interest to contemporary debates in social and political thought, I want to examine a limited number of themes in this article. The title of the discussion, "Human Nature: Power vs. Justice," conveys in itself a great deal about the respective

antimodernist and modernist positions of Foucault and Chomsky. The discussion touches on past and present debates about ideas of essentialism that are particularly pertinent for the social sciences.³ In this article I will set out what I take to be the three main strands of Foucault's anti-essentialist critique and its implications for social and political thought. This, of course, is only one strand of Foucault's rich and powerful work, but it is only these specific themes that I am concerned with here. I will then turn to Chomsky's rationalist account of human nature in order to set out its implications for social and political thought and the ways in which it might be able to counter the powerful anti-essentialist critique made by Foucault. In so doing I will outline three aspects of Chomsky's work as a defense of a rationalist understanding of epistemology and what I take to be his implicit realist ontology. I am arguing, then, that an understanding of some form of essentialism is a methodological requirement for social and political thought and that Chomsky's ideas provide some useful insights into what form this might take. Ultimately, Chomsky's work provides good grounds for rejecting the dualism of either strong essentialism or anti-essentialism.

Foucault and Chomsky are perhaps the major intellectual-activist figures of the past thirty years in the Western world, and as such, their discussion is of some significance in setting out not only their intellectual differences, which I take to be quite profound, but also their similarities. As the discussion reveals, Chomsky and Foucault share a similar understanding of the history of scientific knowledge and its development and also its misapplication in the social or human sciences. In the political realm, both men recognize the need to challenge sources of illegitimate power and authority within their own societies. In addition, they also share an opposition to vanguardist political strategies, an anarchist theme that connects their social and political thought. Ultimately, however, and what I will illustrate in this article, their respective positions rest on fundamentally different conceptions of human nature, epistemology, and ontology. In many respects, it is when they turn to questions of social and political theory and practice that these differences are most starkly exposed and what I take to be their respective modernist and antimodernist positions are clearly revealed.⁴ Thus, their ideas about politics and emancipation are related to their respective essentialist and constructivist or anti-essentialist philosophies.⁵ I want to begin, then, by giving an overview of the anti-essentialist critique of Chomsky's ideas that Foucault sets out in the discussion.

2. Problems of Essence in Social and Political Thought

Foucault is the key figure in what is often described as the linguistic turn in modern social theory, and the impact of his ideas has enveloped a wide range of disciplines within the social sciences.⁶ His analysis of discourses and discursive practices raises significant problems for the approach to knowledge and being that runs through Chomsky's work and is, in my view, the most important strand of anti-essentialist thought in modern social theory. In this respect, Foucault is the perfect foil for Chomsky, and in this article it is my intention to use his ideas as a counter against what Chomsky describes as his own Enlightenment heritage. From their debate, I take it that there are three related but distinctive anti-essentialist criticisms that Foucault makes of Chomsky's position and that these feed into his understanding of the theory and practice of politics. These three criticisms do not exhaust the anti-essentialist canon, but they serve to structure the main thrust of Foucault's disagreement with Chomsky.

a. Reductionism/Biologism

Foucault: "Yes, but isn't there a danger here? You say that a certain human nature exists, that this human nature has not been given in actual society the rights and possibilities which allow it to realize 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 civilization, from our culture?"⁷

A familiar theme in anti-essentialism is that approaches to social science that draw on the notion of the essential qualities of people, society, or institutions tend to make two major errors. The first of these is to assume that all social and political phenomena can be understood by reducing them to some transcendent and essential fact about people or institutions in general that cuts across differences of culture, history, and society. This kind of reductionism seeks to set out the universal characteristics of people and their institutions as though they do not change over time and space. A good example of this can be drawn from a quote by James Rosenau about the way in which we should understand states in international relations:

As a focus of study, the nation-state is no different from the atom or the single cell organism. Its pattern of behavior, idiosyncratic traits, and internal structure are as amenable to the process of formulating and testing hypotheses as are the

characteristics of the electron or molecule . . . in terms of science-as-method, [physics and foreign policy analysis] are essentially the same.⁸

On this understanding, the state becomes a reified object that can be studied like any other feature of the natural world and has a brute facticity about it that is more important than any superficial differences of culture, ideology, knowledge, history, and so on. By reducing social and political life to its universal, unchanging, and constituent components, we hope to move towards a social science that is predictive and probabilistic, based on the assumption that we have uncovered the key variables with the greatest force in determining outcomes. Rosenau's approach is an extreme but illustrative example of scientistic attempts to model the social sciences on a natural science such as physics, and rests on the assumption that there are no substantive differences between either the objects of study in the natural and social world or the methods by which we might interpret and explain them. As Foucault has observed throughout his work, this kind of scientism, presented as a neutral and objective science of people and society, has emerged in the wake of what he calls governmentality and bio-power.⁹ In this sense, these terms refer to the (mis)application of science and its prestigious authority to an understanding of politics and society. These reductionist moves are synonymous with essentialism for many of its critics, and they provide governing institutions and their agents with allegedly scientific tools by which to classify and order society into simple components that deny, in practice, its rich diversity and complexity.

Related to this is the second theme of Foucault's anti-essentialist criticism, that of biologism. Biologism is the assumption that we can understand the behavior and motivations of people by reducing them to their fundamental biological drives and dispositions.¹⁰ Thus, the nature of institutions and the way in which the agents who exercise power within them choose to act can be understood by locating the latent factors of human nature as biological principles that constrain and shape such outcomes. In their most extreme variant, these arguments present people's behavior as being solely determined by their biological drives. In the debate, Foucault raises clear objections to the significance of the biological aspects of the human condition in shaping knowledge and social behavior.¹¹ Indeed, he goes on to argue that the very concepts of life and of human nature have been shaped by the natural sciences, a point with which Chomsky has some sympathy in the discussion. As Foucault asserts, if we want to understand the meaning of human nature, then we need to

uncover the factors that have produced our mode of understanding and of representing it in different epochs ("Grilles," as he calls them). The dominant modes of understanding (or discourses) for Foucault have been the various human sciences with their attempts to impose meanings of normality and pathology on the human condition.¹² This becomes a question of power/knowledge (to use the terminology of Foucault's later work) as our conception and understanding of the meaning of human nature is produced by the dominant discursive practices of any given epoch. Our task, then, is not so much to understand human nature as an objective category as it is to understand why we have come to think of it in the way that we do. The question that Foucault's criticisms prompt is: How has our understanding of human nature been constructed and what alternatives have been marginalized and excluded from this understanding?¹³ Foucault provides us with a strong critique of what are often taken to be two defining characteristics of essentialism in social and political thought.

b. Homogenization/Determinism

A familiar criticism of ideas of essence in social and political thought is voiced by Foucault when he notes that references to human nature are in part an attempt to deny the importance of differences in human identity and culture. This has become a familiar theme in postmodern and poststructuralist thought, but it is Foucault who voices its importance most clearly and who provides detailed historical (archaeological and genealogical) narratives that focus on the way in which the complexity of human identity has been suppressed in modernity.¹⁴ This movement towards homogeneity is seen as being part of Enlightenment themes about universality and the "brotherhood of man" which place a priority on the essential unity of the human species, a factor said to be inherent in our underlying human nature. The practical impact of this, according to Foucault, can be gauged in the rise of governmentality and bio-power. "Governmentality" is a term he uses to describe the rise of modern political and social institutions that, in tandem with the emergence of the sovereign nation-state, have sought to categorize, compartmentalize, and control populations by placing them into clearly defined groups.¹⁵ In related fashion, Foucault uses the concept of bio-power to describe how these institutions seek to shape the social body by placing people into these distinct social categories. Once you are successfully categorized, then you will be clearly marked in society and treated accordingly: deviant,

criminal, lunatic, or the flipside: social scientist, police officer, doctor. These positions of authority or subordination are ingrained in the social body through the discursive practices that construct what we take to be our essential human nature or qualities.¹⁶ Foucault's concern is with the attempt to construct this linear and homogenous social order at the expense of what he takes to be most distinct and important about the human condition: its diversity and complexity. These latter qualities have been suppressed in modernity so that order can be imposed on society. It is governmentality and bio-power that impose homogeneity rather than human nature.

In related fashion, Foucault argues that accounts of human nature or the biological bases of human understanding and action have led towards deterministic theories that deny the possibility of meaningful agency. If human nature causes us to act in the way that we do, then for Foucault this is a deterministic argument that predicts a regularity and continuity to human behavior over time which his own historical studies fundamentally contradict. It is not this deterministic account of causality and regularity that marks the evolution of human society, rather, it is the way in which what Foucault describes as an open-ended and limitless capacity for self-invention that has been suppressed and constrained in the search for order that is the most striking characteristic of modernity.¹⁷ Foucault's social ontology emphasizes what Gray has called the lack of fixity to human identity and nature, a thoroughly Nietzschean idea that human identity and nature are self-creating and transcend any biological constraint.¹⁸ For Foucault, the search for biological bases for human nature is yet another example of the way in which modernity has generated institutions in search of a truth that is transcendent of time and space, a truth that will enable us to settle the idea of the good society once and for all. Human nature is the ultimate essentialist category in social and political thought, as it offers to provide us with the *ultimate* cause behind all human action and behavior. Foucault emphasizes the way in which such human sciences have been used to control populations in modernity by categorizing them and defining their social position. This becomes a classic example of the misappropriation of scientific knowledge for political purposes.

c. Social Constructivism¹⁹

The final and most prevalent anti-essentialist argument developed by Foucault in his debate with Chomsky and throughout the course of

his work is the general theme of social constructivism. Simply expressed, social constructivism seeks to overturn essentialist approaches to social and political thought by arguing that all specifically human practices and institutions are contingent. They are not, *in any sense*, to be understood as the necessary outcomes of inherent constraints imposed by human nature, but are in fact a reflection of the extreme malleability of the human condition. In practice, human beings are capable of making diverse and radically different kinds of social and political orders within which myriad beliefs, meanings, and identities are possible.²⁰ The consequences of this approach to understanding people and society are many, but there are two in particular that are reflected in Foucault's debate with Chomsky. The first is that knowledge is not generated by a deeper understanding of an objective social reality, as essentialists would hope to claim in at least some sense, but is in fact a reflection of the histories, cultures, and narratives of distinct groups of peoples over time and space. Thus, knowledge is not generated by innate properties in the strong sense in which Chomsky argues, but is passed on through the diverse discursive practices that have shaped modernity. As a consequence, our understanding of what is true at any given time, be it about the natural or the social world, is a reflection of what Foucault later called "regimes of truth."²¹ By this he means that each historical period can be marked by the range of discourses that construct the beliefs that we have about the natural and social world. It is the rules of understanding established by these discourses that construct and set parameters to what we take to be true about the world. The kind of rationalist epistemology advocated by Chomsky is, on this understanding, a relic of Enlightenment metaphysics that sought to locate the foundations that would provide us with absolute certainty about the natural and social world.²² On the contrary, for Foucault and social constructivists generally, knowledge is not innate in any sense of the term, but is thoroughly historicized and passed on to us through the discursive practices that construct the social body at both the macro and the micro level.

The implications of social constructivism are seen by many as being both positive and progressive for social and political thought. In practice, it suggests that there are no obstacles to the possibility of emancipation that are *inherent to the human condition*. The plasticity of human identity and the absence of what is often called fixity means that we have the capacity to transcend existing obstacles to freedom and equality, be they institutionally based or manifesting

themselves in the practices of individuals or groups. Thus, social constructivists have been associated with progressive political positions as they provide a strong argument to challenge entrenched forms of social division and hierarchy that are tied to essentialist arguments such as those based on race, gender, or class.²³ If there are no essential qualities to the human condition or social life that constrain and enable the range of possible social forms, then it becomes a question of imagination and will-power on the part of those wishing to change society. There are no necessary constraints to human action or identity beyond the contingent limitations of socially constructed norms and institutions. This point is implicit in Foucault's views on social transformation when he rejects Chomsky's defense of the importance of ideas of justice that should serve as some form of guide to social and political movements. On the contrary, Foucault argues that the task for such groups is simply to take power and change society. This latter point leads me into the relationship between Foucault's philosophy and his ideas on political practice as set out in his debate with Chomsky.

3. Anti-Essentialism and Political Practice

The logical outcome of the kind of anti-essentialist thought developed by Foucault and others is realized in his political views, which consistently sought to emphasize the need to allow for the diversity and plurality of human subjectivity and identity in any social order. As has been stressed thus far, for Foucault, *difference* is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity, and it has been the main feature of modernity that we have sought to deny and suppress this social fact. Differences were seen to challenge the authority of sovereign bodies who sought to establish the norms, institutions, and practices that would unite and regulate a population within the confines of modern nation-states.²⁴ Even those emancipatory political doctrines that emerged from the Enlightenment with a view to liberating humanity, most obviously socialism and communism, suppressed differences in pursuit of a common good constructed around such notions as class. It is a common theme of postmodern and poststructuralist political thought to focus on the latent totalitarianism of such political doctrines.²⁵

As a consequence of this diversity, political opposition is fragmented in accord with the fluidity and complexity of human identity. For Foucault, resistance to oppressive practices could not be realized

through the mechanisms of centralized political parties that emphasized an (at best) stultifying uniformity over the need for sensitivity to diversity. In his discussion with Chomsky, Foucault also makes clear that there are no transcendent principles by which the goals of political practice could be evaluated. Even the notion of a "goal" reflects a hidden teleology for many postmodernists, a position that is understandable but mistaken, as I will explain when I turn to Chomsky's response to Foucault's political analysis. The idea of transcendent political principles of justice, as Foucault makes clear, is extremely dangerous for social and political thought and again is a product of the modernist aspiration to certainty and absolute truth which would enable us to remove the risk of practical judgment from social and political life.²⁶ On such a view, the concept of justice as Chomsky develops it is akin to Platonic idealism, as Foucault suggests, and becomes yet another "regime of truth" by which people could be ordered and controlled rather than emancipated.

Such is Foucault's opposition to the role that transcendent principles play in political life—an understandable one given his constructivist account of the complete openness of human identity—that he ultimately puts forward a thesis that is remarkably Hobbesian in many respects. As he says quite simply,

Foucault: "... 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."²⁷

Having assumed the mantle of power, they are then open to reconstruct society into a classless realm of social activity. Foucault, like Hobbes, is an arch-nominalist who asserts that power is the ultimate goal for any social and political movement and that the idea of transcendent principles to guide political action is a residue of bourgeois thought in Chomsky's politics that will ultimately serve only to hinder the possibility of successful social transformation.²⁸ Justice, he says, is an idea that we have created in different times and places: it refers to nothing more than that.²⁹ This proves to be a fundamental point of divergence from Chomsky and is a logical outcome, in my view, of their respective essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives. I want now to turn to Chomsky's account of human nature before examining the ways in which I think that he offers useful insights into a form of essentialism that can be defended in the social sciences.

4. Chomsky on Human Nature

Noam Chomsky's work stretches across a range of disciplines embracing linguistics, philosophy, and the social sciences. A unifying theme that connects his work in linguistics with his social and political thought is that of human nature. As a consequence, Chomsky's account of essentialism connects his epistemology and ontology in ways that provide a powerful counter to the anti-essentialist critique of Foucault and contemporary writers. Before turning to the specific responses that Chomsky's ideas present to Foucault's main anti-essentialist criticisms, it is worth setting out what I take to be the central strands of Chomsky's account of human nature and the ways in which they connect his epistemological and ontological concerns.

a. Chomsky's Rationalism—An Innatist Fallacy?

Although Chomsky is recognized as the most important contemporary thinker in the rationalist tradition, it is important to bear in mind that he did not begin his work as a convinced rationalist. Indeed, he began his linguistic career working within the orthodox empiricist framework that he was later to overturn. It was the limitations and inadequacies of the empiricist-inductivist approach to explaining the acquisition of language that forced Chomsky to consider the possibility of a strong and underlying innate component to the acquisition of language that he saw as a central feature of human nature.³⁰ As Chomsky says in the debate,

... 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 these 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.³¹

In practice, Chomsky addressed what he has subsequently come to call "Plato's Problem": How is it that we are able to acquire the complex and rich forms of language that we do from such an early age and with such apparent ease given the partial and fragmented information that we receive? No one teaches us the rules of grammar of a particular language, but we acquire them with both speed and (barring pathology) comparative ease. As Chomsky's work in linguistics has illustrated, it is impossible to make sense of this knowledge acquisition on the basis of any inductive-empiricist model. The only alternative that seems persuasive is to assume that we are born

with a capacity to recognize and understand human language in general (not a particular language). Thus Chomsky has developed a modular account of what he calls the mind-brain that posits an underlying structure that provides us with a rich biological basis from which we are able to acquire knowledge of language. In more speculative mode, Chomsky has also advanced the idea that it is likely that other areas of knowledge are based on this modular form of structure which, in conjunction with experience, enables us to make sense of and order our experiences into workable theories and practices concerning both the natural and social world.³²

However, unlike classical rationalist epistemologies, Chomsky argues for what he has come to call a "methodological naturalism," which eschews the absolutism of a priori rationalist beliefs in favor of a form of scientific realism that says that such theories about language acquisition (or any other aspect of the social or natural world) have to be judged on the basis of their logical consistency and their empirical purchase.³³ As a consequence, all theories are fallible, and, as Chomsky concedes readily about his own work, likely to be superseded in time by better and more penetrating accounts. Chomsky's scientific realism does not deny the importance of interpretation in theory construction, nor does it fall into the problem of what might be called an innatist fallacy. His account of the acquisition of language is based on detailed empirical study that leads towards the conclusion that there are really existing structures of the mind-brain that enable us to acquire knowledge of particular languages. From the acquisition of a finite number of rules we are able to generate an infinite array of sentences, a factor that empiricist-inductivist approaches to language acquisition have never been able to explain satisfactorily. Indeed, Chomsky's Post-Cartesian rationalism is more complex than it might at first appear to be, in that the intellectual heritage for his ideas (set out clearly in his *Cartesian Linguistics*) embraces writers usually associated with romanticism, such as Herder, Rousseau, and, most importantly, Humboldt. If Chomsky's rationalist epistemology is the basis for his scientific approach to language acquisition, it is his concern with the ordinary creative use of language in everyday situations that connects his interests to those associated with romanticism such as Humboldt. Importantly, there can be no a priori assumptions about theories: they have to be evaluated in the light of empirical evidence, a point that Chomsky has said those associated with classical empiricism and rationalism would accept.³⁴ Thus, while there will

always be competing interpretations about the natural and social world, the only way in which we can evaluate them is in the light of their logical consistency and the empirical evidence available. To do less than this is to retreat into metaphysics and idealism.

Returning to Plato's Problem in more general terms, we might ask: How is it that we are able to acquire knowledge about the world given the diversity of information that we receive? Chomsky has speculated on this wider question in various places and has built on an idea originally put forward by Charles Sanders Peirce that human beings possess what Peirce described as the "natural power" of abduction.³⁵ Peirce reached this conclusion by considering the problem of why it is that we make intellectual progress in some areas of inquiry while in others we seem to be able to make only limited progress. Peirce's conclusion—surprising, perhaps, given his association with philosophical pragmatism—was that we are predisposed to construct theories about certain areas of the natural and social world but not others. Chomsky has developed and commented on this idea of abduction, which he argues constrains and enables our general theory-constructing ability in the natural sciences and in our everyday life. For example, in interview he has said the following:

Lunsford: "I'm intrigued by that [abduction] and I was wondering if there is any sense in which you feel that there's any kind of abductive process at work in your political thought . . ."

Chomsky: "Sure, and there is in everything you do. I mean, forget political thought. Take something even simpler. How do you place yourself in a social structure? Plainly, you do. You interact with other people in a way which relates to their expectations. Sometimes we make mistakes and get into trouble, but there's a tremendous amount of adaptation in complex social situations, which, by and large, works. And that must mean that you have in your head, somehow, a theory of society, a theory of personality, and when things go wrong, you notice it and try to adjust. How did that get there? Well, it got there by animal instinct, by abduction. It is a theory that we don't know much about, but if we could figure out what it was, we would doubtless find that it's extremely refined in comparison with the crude evidence on which it was constructed, that it's pretty much uniform in basic respects across the species because it reflects species characteristics. And in fact that's kind of like language . . . and what one calls political thought is just a conscious part of this, dealing with problems that are somewhat remote from direct, immediate experience problems of power and decision-making and control in the broader social world, beyond those of the world in which you are interacting."³⁶

In these terms, abduction can be defined as "a process in which the mind forms hypotheses according to some rules and selects among them with reference to evidence, and, presumably, other factors."³⁷ Such an assumption provides an immediate challenge to the anti-essentialist premises underlying Foucault's work. Our abductive ability to develop scientific theories, according to Chomsky, is based

on two factors: the human component, which will be rich but unevenly spread across the species; and the institutional/social framework within which we are situated.³⁸ On Chomsky's understanding, this has profound implications for how we should think about human nature and for society in general. Our human nature bestows on us a rich heritage and basis for the acquisition of knowledge, and although it will be spread across the species (barring pathology), we should expect to find that human beings are rich and diverse in their talents. For Chomsky this is something to be welcomed, as it is what makes humanity so interesting and unique.³⁹ Thus, Chomsky is able to provide an account of the diversity of human practices and talents as generated from the basis of a human nature that is universal. This is an important point that I will turn to shortly when I look at the specific ways in which Chomsky's work provides us with the grounds for rejecting Foucault's anti-essentialist critique. In terms of acquiring knowledge about the world or building successful theories, Chomsky has said that it is largely chance or accident if this turns out to be the case.⁴⁰ We should bear in mind that Chomsky considers that there is nothing like a general science of human nature (and on occasions he has said that nor is there likely to be). However, his account of human nature is not simply an arbitrary belief, but reflects the universalist nature of his theory of language acquisition which Chomsky takes to be a part of the "*human essence*."⁴¹ Chomsky's work in linguistics has led him to defend the idea of a universal human nature, which sees us as being endowed with specific natural properties that are uniformly distributed across the species. As he has written on this point in response to Quine's famous thesis of indeterminacy,

We assume that the next person is like us in relevant respects, unless we have evidence to the contrary, just as a chemist who analyzes two samples from the same solution assumes, unless there is evidence to the contrary, that they are the same in relevant respects; . . . When pressed, all would agree that even the fullest evidence could not show definitively that these assumptions are correct, . . . , the assumption that the other person is like us in relevant respects would be confirmed, . . . , from evidence of a variety of sorts. We rely, in such cases, on concepts of simplicity, insight and explanatory power that are not at all understood and that are presumably rooted in our cognitive capacities.⁴²

If our ability to acquire language did not reflect some kind of natural properties that were universally distributed across the species, it would be hard to explain the ease with which we acquire a specific language. Chomsky's point here is that given the uneven and partial forms of language that we are exposed to as children, it is remarkable

that we are able to acquire knowledge of a particular language with the ease that we do. No one literally teaches us the rules of English, French, or Japanese. On the contrary, we appear to be predisposed to acquire knowledge of particular languages in even the most impoverished of environments. Thus, for Chomsky, this must reflect some natural cognitive capacity that is found throughout the human species and as such is suggestive of a wider range of properties that might make up our rich human nature. We are left with fragments and snapshots of the complexity of humanity that reveal its unique creative qualities as well as its capacity for violence and inhumanity. As such, Chomsky rejects the open and malleable account of the human condition put forward by anti-essentialism and argues that there are important natural constraints both to the knowledge that we can acquire and what we might become as individuals and groups.

b. A Realist Ontology?

Given Chomsky's work in linguistics, it is not surprising that he is invariably associated with the development of a rationalist epistemology. What is less examined but is implicit in his scientific realism is that Chomsky also puts forward what we might call a realist ontology. It is this latter point that is reflected in his account of human nature as being based in the modular structures of the mind-brain. As Chomsky says, these are to be seen as real properties of human nature, not merely abstract hypotheses.⁴³ Thus, Chomsky is positing the existence of real and yet unobservable structures of the mind-brain that are the central properties of our human nature. As other writers have commented, there is a clear link between Chomsky's ontological claims and Bhaskar's Critical Realism, the latter being an attempt to develop a coherent and systematic realist philosophy that embraces both the natural and social sciences.⁴⁴ Chomsky has voiced a great deal of criticism about the scientific pretensions of the social sciences, including his by now famous assault on behaviorism. These criticisms are invariably well taken and in some respects similar to Foucault's own critique of the human sciences. As Chomsky has commented, the science in social science is invariably used as a mechanism for excluding the general populace from debate about issues such as social policy and foreign policy. His work in tearing away the veils of elitism that surround many of these areas of study has been an important antidote to the separation of the social sciences from popular audiences in recent decades. However, it should not be mistaken for a wholesale condemnation

of social science. Although Chomsky's criticism of what he sees as the ideologically laden content of much social science has probably hardened in recent years, he has also talked about the need to retain scientific rigor in both the natural *and* the social sciences.⁴⁵ This does not, and given his account of human nature, cannot mean that the social sciences will ever be predictive and explanatory in the manner of physics, given the important differences between phenomena in the natural and the social world. Such an assumption would be absurd given the creativity, invention, history, and free activity that are synonymous with the evolution of human societies. While Chomsky generally eschews the idea that there are any substantive "theories" in the social sciences, his defense of scientific realism as a model for both the natural and social sciences leads him to defend the view that we should still strive to give the best interpretations and explanations that we can of social and political events. This depends on utilizing tools such as logic, intuition, and imagination to interpret the available empirical evidence in order to explain the problem with which we are concerned. Although realism is a complex term, it is an approach to inquiry that connects the natural and social sciences. Chomsky shares a range of concerns with realists in social theory: locating the structures and mechanisms that help to generate concrete outcomes or events; understanding what must exist in order for a particular event/phenomenon to have occurred.⁴⁶ These essential properties help to define the object with which we are concerned and therefore to distinguish it from others, and they also help us to understand the range of powers that the object is capable of exercising. In this sense, we can take it that these factors are *real* by dint of their effects, and we assume that our knowledge of these objects and events is separate from the objects/events themselves. As Chomsky has said, we try to develop interpretations that explain the facts of the matter but this is constrained by two main factors:

(i) Our innate faculties of the mind-brain. Chomsky argues that it is simply luck or an accident of our innate faculties, our abductive capacity to develop theories, if a theory fits with the events/objects that exist in the world.

(ii) External factors. These might include the nature of the institutions in which we work, and the impact of prevailing ideologies on our understanding, particularly of social and political events.

Nonetheless, the implication of these realist assumptions is that we have no alternative other than to pursue a rational strategy of

interpretation and explanation that is based, as far as is possible, on the logical assumptions to be derived from the available empirical evidence. Although Chomsky is notoriously loathe to talk about theory in his social and political work, it is not unreasonable to see him situated broadly within a scientific realist framework and sharing an affinity with the Critical Realist school developed by Bhaskar and others. I now turn to the way in which Chomsky's assumptions enable us to develop a coherent form of essentialism that is able to counter the criticisms put forward by Foucault.

5. Defending Essentialism: Chomsky's Contribution

The meaning of the term "essentialism" is far from clear, yet it often receives a misleadingly simple definition in the hands of its critics. In the same way that there can be weak and strong forms of social constructivism, there are also differing kinds of essentialism. Awareness of this complexity is important, as it sensitizes us to the dangers of oversimplification. In philosophical terms, the idea of essentialism refers to the belief that objects in the natural and social world have properties that serve to define what they are. That is, they are the properties that make an object the thing that it is rather than something else. To give a simple example, football and rugby are both sports but they are not the *same* sport, and this essential difference has to do with their respective rules. In some versions of essentialism, such properties are taken to be the only characteristics of importance in understanding the objects concerned, as we saw with Rosenau's admittedly extreme comparison of states and atoms. This kind of strong or absolutist essentialism is reductive and deterministic, in the sense that it tells us that when we know what these contingent properties are we can predict the regular and perhaps invariant outcomes of the objects concerned, be they states or atoms. They do the same thing over and over again, irrespective of time or place. Such an approach to essentialism is flawed, though, because it does not allow for a number of important factors, the most significant of which is the relationship between necessary and contingent factors. To illustrate this, we can return to the sporting metaphor we used earlier. Both football and rugby are sports defined by their rules. We can take those rules to be the essence of the sports in the sense that they constrain and enable how the games are to be played, recognizing that the rules and hence the essence of the sport can change over time. However, we cannot, as a conse-

quence, make determinate predictions about the outcomes of such games because of the contingent factors involved. The quality of players, tiredness, biased referees, and linesmen with poor eyesight are all liable to lead to an infinite range of outcomes in games, no matter how much there may be an overall pattern or structure to teams and how they play. The rules that are the essential properties of the sport are capable of generating an infinite range of outcomes for a reason that strong essentialists fail to note. Social systems are open systems within which a range of conflicting and complementary mechanisms operate, ranging from psychological, biological, and chemical through to the practices of institutions and economic structures. The way in which these structures and mechanisms interact with each other over time and space and with the contingent properties of individuals, groups, and institutions is not something that can be reduced to predictive formulae of the kind that behaviorists have sought and which Chomsky has strongly criticized. This does not mean, however, that there are no patterns to social and political life. For example, Chomsky's work on the media with Ed Herman highlights recurring interpretations of issues and events of importance to state and corporate power in the U.S. But these are not *invariant*: they could be different if the media were not subjected to the kind of structural, cultural, and institutional pressures that Chomsky and Herman locate in their work.⁴⁷

Two points emerge here that are of significance in defending a form of essentialism from Foucault's critique. The first is that the strong version of essentialism is indeed flawed, making few concessions as it does to the fact that social phenomena have histories and can and do change over time. It is also the case that strong anti-essentialist positions that deny any place for essential factors in social science are equally flawed. For example, to argue that human nature is an open form from which an endless vista of human identities and social forms can be constructed is to overlook the real properties of human nature that Chomsky's epistemology and ontology suggest must exist. These essential properties are not simply constraining, though: they are generative properties that operate in conjunction with the contingent factors of the natural and social world to produce the rich and complex social forms that we experience. The second point here is that some social phenomena *can* be seen to have essential properties while others do not: states do, identities don't. We do not need to reify social phenomena with essential properties in the way that Rosenau reifies states into atoms.

It is sufficient to note that the essential properties of social phenomena are those that endure over time and act both to define the object and set out its powers and capabilities. Again, Chomsky and Herman's work on the mainstream U.S. news media is useful here, as it is concerned with the properties of those institutions that lead them to interpret events of importance to U.S. state and corporate power in the way that they do. The key point here and by way of distinction from strong essentialism is to note that social phenomena with essential properties can and do change over time precisely because their existence is the outcome of human practices: they have been made and their properties are the outcome of human action. As a consequence, they could be changed.⁴⁸ In part, Herman and Chomsky's work on the media illustrates this point quite clearly. The form taken by media representations of events central to the interests of U.S. state and corporate power reflects the development of those institutions over time. The embedding within these institutions of a culture that is largely subservient to powerful interests coupled with the wider structural pressures of economic and political power has led to the current existence of servile mainstream media that Herman and Chomsky have documented. Within these institutions there are spaces for journalists to challenge the consensus, but these tend to be limited and prone to a range of disciplinary mechanisms. I do not wish to elaborate here on their media analysis beyond the fact that it illustrates that social phenomena such as media institutions have enduring properties that act to constrain and enable outcomes: in this case, the form that representation of political, social, and economic events take. These properties have been and could be in the future quite different from what they are now. They are the result of human practices, and these practices could be changed in order to construct genuinely open and critical media. It is the contingent power relations that currently exist in U.S. society that inhibit this possibility.⁴⁹

If we do not accept this proposition, then we are left facing a major dilemma in social science. On the one hand, it suggests that all definitions of social phenomena are thoroughly contingent and shaped solely by language and history, not by any attempt on our part to understand independently existing external phenomena.⁵⁰ Our knowledge about objects and events in the natural and social world does not refer to the real properties of things, but constructs what those properties actually are. By extension, it also suggests that our knowledge about such objects is not separate from the objects

themselves and is not fallible in any objective empirical sense.⁵¹ By contrast, Chomsky's scientific realism, with its emphasis on using empirical evidence to interpret phenomena and evaluate theories, argues precisely that our knowledge is *knowledge of objects that are both real and independent of us*. Therefore we can evaluate our theories in the light of the empirical evidence and their explanatory power.⁵² This is equally true for natural and social phenomena, as Chomsky and Herman's work on the U.S. news media illustrates. Such media institutions may be socially constructed in the sense that they are made by people and their concrete practices, but this does not mean that they have no recurring and essential properties that help to define what they are. Although we can view these properties as being essential characteristics of specific institutions or social relations, it is equally important to stress that as human practices they have a history and can and do change over time.⁵³ For the strong anti-essentialist, our knowledge about objects actually constructs what we take the real properties of those objects to be. This last point is very problematic, as it leads us into a form of idealism which, as I think Chomsky's views make clear, faces major epistemological and ontological problems. In order to examine the nature of these difficulties, we can now turn to the way in which Chomsky's work provides a specific counter to Foucault's anti-essentialist criticisms.

a. Biologism/Reductionism

As we saw earlier, a central part of the biologist and reductionist critique that Foucault made in his debate with Chomsky was that it presented us with an understanding of human behavior and social forms that saw them as being the linear and invariant outcome of our innate inheritance. For Foucault, such an understanding of the relationship between a biological human nature and social behavior was deeply problematic, as it could only be sustained on the basis of overlooking the diversity and complexity of meanings, practices, and beliefs of people in concrete historical circumstances. Such assumptions seemed to deny the creativity and fluid nature of human practices and leave people as little more than pre-programmed biological machines. In fact, Chomsky's account of human nature does not lead to these conclusions at all, and potentially provides a more satisfying account of the complexity and creativity of human behavior than does the anti-essentialist critique that Foucault makes.

Taking the question of the causal power of human nature first, Chomsky's account does not imply that (in Humean fashion)⁵⁴ the exercise of our natural causal powers will lead to anything like the invariant and linear pattern of actions of behaviorist assumptions.⁵⁵ As his linguistic work shows, human nature acts to provide a generative framework from which an infinite array of linguistic outcomes can be produced.⁵⁶ How and what people actually say when exercising these linguistic powers will reflect a range of factors: their genetic inheritance, their environment, education, culture, gender, education, and so on. As I mentioned earlier, the exercise of the general causal powers bestowed on us by our human nature takes place in an open system in which a range of other causal powers and mechanisms are active or latent. It is the complex interaction of these factors that rules out the idea that there is a straightforward or reductive relationship between human nature and either social behavior or the forms that societies might take. This does not mean that there are not constraints that serve to encourage the production of certain outcomes rather than others, though, as again Herman and Chomsky's work on the media aims to illustrate. What it does mean is that we need to trace the relationship between the necessary and contingent factors that have acted to produce the phenomena with which we are concerned. In this sense, the natural causal powers of human agents are central to their capacity to act freely. They can choose, *under different degrees of constraint*, whether to exercise those powers in order to try to alter their environment. If we did not as agents have these causal powers as a part of our human nature, then we would be beings driven by a response to external stimuli, as behaviorists have long argued.⁵⁷

With regard to the question of creativity, this issue of freedom and constraint is again important for Chomsky. Chomsky regards creativity, imagination, and invention as key factors that render the human species unique, and in the interview addresses it in two ways. Ordinary creativity is evidenced in the everyday linguistic practices of people who are able to utilize their linguistic powers to produce original statements and to translate those of others. Ordinary creativity is a constant factor of human life, as we are daily called on to respond creatively to situations that may be similar to things we have encountered before but are never precisely the same. This is not the outcome of simple biological programming as Foucault argues is the case with accounts of human nature that posit a strong biological basis. Rather, human nature provides us with a generative

framework that enables us to make sense of and order our experiences and ultimately to respond to them as best we can. The extent to which we make the correct responses in any given situation will depend on the complex interplay of necessary and contingent factors that shape our individual biographies. A crucial part of this process, as Chomsky has made clear in various places, is the way in which our abductive capacity enables us to acquire knowledge of the rules of language and other areas of social life.⁵⁸ A creative act, on Chomsky's view, is not simply the unconstrained response of an individual to his or her environment, as such an understanding of creativity and human nature is remarkably similar to the behaviorist account of a malleable or plastic human nature that he has long criticized for its lack of explanatory power with regard to human behavior and knowledge. For Chomsky, creativity is "free action within the framework of a system of rules."⁵⁹ There is no contradiction between the idea of a rich genetic inheritance and the free creative exercise of those powers within the context of concrete social circumstances where a range of rules, structures, and causal mechanisms are either latent or manifest. Chomsky also notes that although the inheritance of human nature is both a rich and species-wide phenomenon, it is also uneven in its distribution: you have an aptitude for mathematics, I have an aptitude for sports, for example. It is this diversity and complexity of individuals and their talents that is for Chomsky a distinguishing feature of the human species and is something to be lauded.⁶⁰ None of this is to deny the importance of environmental factors in the development and maturation of our array of potential powers and skills. Chomsky argues that it helps to provide us with an understanding of human needs and an idea of the good society, in that a good society will be one in which resources are utilized to encourage the development of the natural powers and potentials that we all possess, irrespective of class, race, or gender. There is a clear link here between Chomsky's ideas of human nature and his social and political thought that I will turn to in more detail shortly.

b. Homogenization/Determinism

As should be reasonably clear by now, Chomsky's account of human nature and its generative powers or potentials does not mean that human identity or social forms and practices will be homogenous, nor does it mean that human behavior is deterministic. On the contrary, the natural powers that we possess are both potentials and

constraints, they are the basis from which diverse and creative actions and practices can be generated. Beyond this, Chomsky draws out the relationship between an understanding of human nature and human needs, thus informing his conclusions that the general satisfaction of human needs is a primary goal of the good society.⁶¹ As Chomsky notes, human beings are clearly capable of a range of social forms and moral codes but equally capable of becoming conscious of them and the range of choices that they have as free agents. This leads him to the conclusion that although cultural practices may take a range of forms, it is unlikely that they are simply limitless.⁶² The important point here is that the essential properties of human nature are not simple constraints that crudely determine human behavior in any given way: they are potentials that in conjunction with a range of contingent factors enable us to develop complex and rich social forms.

The question that confronts us is an institutional and organizational one: What aspects of human nature do we most want to encourage and flourish? What institutions and patterns of social organization are most conducive to these choices? Chomsky's view is that we should strive for a society in which the range of human needs is satisfied in a fair and equitable manner, recognizing that the uneven distribution of natural powers across the species will mean that we do not all need identical things. For example, while we all need food, you may be allergic to peanuts while I like them a great deal. Thus, the way in which we satisfy general needs has to be sensitive to the differences that affect the choices of individuals and groups. By contrast, and pursuing Chomsky's concern with creativity, we all possess natural creative powers to differing levels, but you are a good painter while I prefer to write poetry. In order to satisfy our creative needs, there would be no point in giving both of us a typewriter. The point here is that although needs-based accounts of social justice such as Chomsky's are grounded in a universalistic claim, they do not lead (as strong anti-essentialists fear) to homogeneity and the suppression of difference. Logically, need satisfaction should produce the opposite.⁶³

There is a clear relationship, then, between human nature and culture in Chomsky's work that suggests that from our inherent properties we are capable of producing a diverse, though not infinite, array of practices, beliefs, and social forms through history. Human nature is a foundation for Chomsky and largely represents a biological constant that connects humanity across time and space. As he says

in the debate, "That is, there is something biologically given, unchangeable, a foundation for whatever it is that we do with our mental capacities in this case," and, later, "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 . . . but of course, the level of acquired knowledge changes, social conditions change."⁶⁴ As we have seen, though, this essentialist claim does not deny the diversity of human practices, knowledge, and beliefs. Instead, it helps to explain them by setting out a clear model of the relationship between the necessary and contingent factors that shape human societies. Chomsky's account of human nature suggests that we need to reject the dualism of either strong essentialism or anti-essentialism and recognize that there is a complex and intricate relationship between the necessary properties of nature, people, and societies and the contingent factors of specific histories and cultures.⁶⁵

c. Discourses and Social Construction

In some respects, the epistemologies put forward by Chomsky and Foucault in their discussion mirror classical debates between rationalists and empiricists over the acquisition of knowledge.⁶⁶ For Foucault, knowledge is generated through the discursive practices that have been constructed in history and which have continued to dominate our mode of understanding and representing the natural and social world. In this sense, there is a marked similarity with older empiricist claims like those of Hume, who saw knowledge and the self as akin to an impression made on the mind through experience. The connection here is that both accounts of the acquisition of knowledge remove the possibility of any innate or subjective component to knowledge acquisition. Foucault makes this point by way of contrast with Chomsky in their discussion in which he comments on the need to overcome the idea of the sovereign subject as the source of knowledge. Instead, knowledge is constitutive of what we take the subject to be.⁶⁷ As we have seen, then, for Foucault the task for social theory in general is to understand the development of these discourses in relation to the institutions that have served to utilize them to shape modern social orders. The radical component of the strong social constructivist position is that it undermines the claims to authority of established forms of power by exposing the absence of foundations to their legitimacy and knowledge. The problem with this, as we have seen, is that strong

constructivist epistemologies make the fundamental error of assuming that because knowledge changes over time—as, for example, one scientific theory replaces another—this illustrates that there are no better or worse grounds by which to evaluate theoretical claims, only different ones. Our knowledge of the world is co-extensive with and constructive of what actually exists, on this view.

By contrast, Chomsky's rationalist epistemology and realist ontology presents us with a profoundly different understanding of knowledge and its acquisition. The subject, to use Foucault's terminology, remains at the heart of the construction of knowledge about the world, but that knowledge is not the same as what actually exists in the world. Rather, our theories about the world are not simply discursive practices that construct what we take to exist, they are attempts to explain the independently existing things in the world and their specific properties. As Chomsky notes, we have only fragmentary insights into the real properties of things in the world and our knowledge is constrained and enabled both by our human nature and by external factors.⁶⁸ It is for this reason that we are fallible in our knowledge about things in the world and can have false beliefs about them.⁶⁹ By the latter I mean that we can, quite simply, be mistaken about the real and defining properties of institutions, practices, and so on. On the strong social constructivist view, this would not appear to be possible. There are *different* beliefs, some of which will be incommensurable, but there cannot be false beliefs, as there are no independent (empirical) grounds by which to evaluate contrasting claims.⁷⁰ This is a fundamental division between strong social constructivism and Chomsky's scientific realism, and it seems to me that the scientific realist position is far more persuasive for the reasons I have set out.

Returning to the connection between empiricism and constructivism, it is also worth noting that in the context of their respective political positions, Chomsky and Foucault's accounts of human nature and the subject are in themselves very important. For Foucault it is the malleability and lack of fixity to human identity and nature that is crucial. We are fluid and hybrid beings with the potential for almost infinite change.⁷¹ This has proven to be an area of some controversy as writers have focused on the (apparent) lack of an account of the subject in Foucault's work. Modernist critics have seen this as a fundamental flaw in Foucault's narratives of the rise of modernity, in the sense that it would appear to leave no grounds for a meaningful defense of the subject from coercion. In short, if

everything is a question of power, as Foucault certainly at times suggests, then what role is there for any ethic that might be grounded in human properties? Conversely, more sympathetic interpretations of Foucault on this issue tend to see his work in terms of arguing for new forms of subjectivity that transcend the established rules and frameworks bequeathed to us through the rise of what Foucault refers to as dominant discourses and bio-power.⁷² By way of contrast, for Chomsky we are a species endowed with a rich innate inheritance from which and in conjunction with existing social forms we are able to generate diverse practices, beliefs, and understandings of the world. Politically, these ontologies have starkly differing implications. As Foucault says in the debate, power is the key for social change. Once the subordinate group has gained power, it can reconstruct society as it wishes, as there are no inherent constraints to what we might become. This paints a picture that is very similar to the one for which Chomsky attacks behaviorism. It suggests that there is nothing inherent to the human condition that could lead us to rule out on ethical grounds wide-scale and oppressive social engineering. What objection could there be to such a project if people are indeed the open texts on which progress and their eventual emancipation could be written?

This, of course, is far from what Foucault actually means in his own political ambitions, but it is a conclusion that his anti-essentialist account of the subject and its malleable condition cannot rule out. By contrast, Chomsky argues that human nature and its real properties provide grounds for opposing certain forms of social engineering that view human beings as simply a means to a desired end. Equally, an account of human nature and human needs provides us with the grounds for making inferences about the form that a good or decent society should take.⁷³ It is from need satisfaction that the full diverse and creative flourishing of the human species will emerge. The point here is not to argue that anti-essentialism is necessarily reactionary and essentialism progressive. The two accounts of human nature are far more complex than this. Rather, I want merely to show that there is nothing inherently progressive about anti-essentialism and constructivism and that in fact an essentialist understanding of human nature and social theory can indeed be related to progressive political goals. There is no necessary contradiction, as some might argue, in Chomsky's rationalist account of human nature and his libertarian socialist politics.

6. Conclusions: Social Change and Emancipation

Foucault: "One makes war to win, not because it is just . . . 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."⁷⁴

I want to conclude by tying together briefly the respective essentialist and anti-essentialist positions of Chomsky and Foucault and the way in which they inform their political thought and practice. The point to be made here is an old one, but one that is often lost sight of in contemporary debates in social and political thought: how we interpret and explain human nature will play an important part in what we think is socially and politically possible, desirable, and acceptable.⁷⁵ Foucault's anti-essentialist approach leads him to a number of assumptions about people, groups, and society that resonate in the political ideas he expresses in the debate with Chomsky. The key points in Foucault's thought here are the decentering of the subject, the nominalist approach to concepts such as justice, and the role that power plays in social and political life. Given the premises from which Foucault is working, it is not surprising that he is suspicious and critical of Chomsky's defense of the idea that an account of justice and the good society should be elaborated by those striving for a better (not ideal) society. To what does justice refer, Foucault asks?⁷⁶ On Foucault's terms, it refers only to the discursive practices and regimes of truth that have characterized modernity. As a consequence, the real task of those seeking social change is to exercise power rather than to grapple with what are abstract and apparently empty concepts. For the anti-essentialist, the task of progressive social change is to reconstruct society and to overturn existing forms of oppression, and as we have seen, there are no necessary constraints to this. Hence, as Foucault says: power is the key. When you exercise it, then, society can be transformed and reconstructed. This mixture of Hobbesian power plays and Nietzschean ideas of the unconstrained creativity of human action is problematic for Chomsky for a number of reasons which highlight, I think, the difficulty of anti-essentialist understandings of social theory and political practice.

Chomsky disagrees fundamentally with Foucault on these points and for reasons that reflect what I see as his particular essentialist ideas. Taking the issue of justice first, there are two strands to this that are central to Chomsky's social and political thought. First, the concept is not a nominalist one shaped solely by discursive practices.

The just society has something to do with what best meets the requirements of human nature and needs. Thus, the good society will not simply be any social order, but will be one tailored towards satisfying these objectives.⁷⁷ By contrast, Foucault's nominalist account of justice leaves us in the situation where the just society is an almost inevitable outcome of the seizure of power and the reconstruction of social order. Chomsky cannot accept this, and he is surely right not to. Foucault's position leaves no *substantial* ethical grounds for rejecting one social order or another: they are all equally just or unjust. Now I am not arguing that Foucault really accepts this, and later in the interview he wants to qualify his position in the light of Chomsky's response. But it remains apparent that there are no logical or ethical reasons on strong constructivist grounds for choosing one form of justice over another if it is simply reducible, as Foucault suggests, to questions of power. Indeed, this latter point is reflected in Foucault's own ambivalence towards ideas of emancipation in general.⁷⁸ For Foucault it is not a question of emancipation, but of the replacement of one regime of truth by another, again echoing his Nietzschean heritage.

The second reason why Chomsky defends the idea that movements for social change should set out an account of the just society has also to do with his understanding of human nature and how it relates to his political views. Unlike Foucault, Chomsky does not attempt to "decenter the subject" from the stage of history but to reassert the ethical and political primacy of the individual in social change. If social change is to be lasting and effective it has to be built on the lasting support of a coalition of social forces who share a range of values and beliefs about what would constitute a better society. Chomsky's account of human nature and the autonomy and creativity of individuals provides strong grounds for the kind of political values that he espouses. People have to come to realize the need for social change; if it is to be lasting, it cannot be forced on them in instrumentalist fashion. There is no hidden teleology to Chomsky's account of social change, and using the satisfaction of human nature and needs as a goal for a better society leads Chomsky only to the following conclusions about social change:

[A]t every stage of history, our concern must be to dismantle those forms of authority and oppression that survive from an era when they might have been justified in terms of the need for security or survival or economic development, but that now contribute to—rather than alleviate—material and cultural deficit. If so, there will be no doctrine of social change fixed for the present and the future, nor even, necessarily, a specific and unchanging concept of the goals toward which

social change would tend. Surely our understanding of the nature of man or of the range of viable social forms is so rudimentary that any far-reaching doctrine must be treated with great scepticism, just as scepticism is in order when we hear that "human nature" or "the demands of efficiency" or "the complexity of modern life" requires this or that form of oppression or autocratic rule.⁷⁹

In Chomsky's account of social change, there are definite constraints as to what would constitute the good society, and clear ideas about what emancipation means in social and political terms. A good society will be one in which the satisfaction of general needs will be met in, as far as is possible, free and uncoerced cooperative social arrangements.⁸⁰ In so doing, such a social order will enable the realization of individual potentials and social cooperation. By contrast, Foucault's anti-essentialism leaves him in a situation whereby it is unclear who is being emancipated, as the subject is little more than the construction of external discursive forces. If there is nothing essential to the human condition, then emancipation becomes an unconstrained and perhaps meaningless idea. It means what we say it does and little more than that.

The key question for Chomsky and others seeking to set out and defend some kind of essentialist ontology remains, however, and it is one that Foucault put to Chomsky in the interview and the one that starts this article:

Foucault: "And contrary to what you think you can't prevent me from believing that these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and that 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."⁸¹

The anti-essentialist critique asks us to explain why we should accept Chomsky's rationalist theory of human nature with its universal implications. After all, what grounds do we have for assuming that Chomsky is writing from anything other than within the perspective of the Enlightenment tradition that he defends, a moment in Western history of great importance, but nonetheless, a moment in Western history. Foucault pushes Chomsky on this point about the ideas of justice that Chomsky feels follow from his account of human nature and the latter responds by saying to Foucault:

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."⁸²

As Foucault asks, what grounds are there for accepting the essentialist views of human nature, the good society, and justice that Chomsky tries to articulate in their debate? This point lies at the heart of a great deal of the postmodern and poststructuralist criticisms of the Enlightenment and the Western tradition of social and political thought, that it claims to speak in transcendent and universal terms and fails to recognise its particular, historical articulation. So what response can be made to this corrosive and important critique from Foucault? It would seem to me that we can respond to this criticism by reference to a number of ideas in Chomsky's work but there are three that I would draw on here. First, with regard to the question of human nature, Chomsky concedes that our insights into it are far from being scientific and that we can gain as much understanding about it from literature as we can from other forms of inquiry. However, the insights and fragmented understandings of human nature that we possess do not rule out the possibility of universal properties underpinning our human potential. As I have tried to show, there is no contradiction between the idea of universality and that of cultural diversity. What Chomsky's model does rule out is the idea that human nature is simply an open text, an unformed property that can simply be whatever we make it. In defense of this view he has, on numerous occasions, asked an insightful question: Why should we assume that our human nature is unstructured? From what we know of the natural world, it is highly structured, and this applies equally to human physiology and to other things in the world. In this sense, the onus of proof is on those who would challenge this view to offer substantive grounds for rejecting the idea that human nature is in some sense a series of fixed properties capable of generating reasonably diverse social forms. As noted earlier, Chomsky's defense of an essentialist account of human nature is not simply an act of faith on his part; it is rooted in the insights gained from his study of human language acquisition. This detailed empirical study of a species-specific natural property provides Chomsky with what he sees as an important insight into one characteristic of the human essence.

The second point to be made here is that contrary to common postmodern and poststructuralist criticisms, it is not Chomsky's intention to close down debate about human nature and politics by claiming some connection to absolute certainty or truth about these matters. On the contrary, the libertarian socialist tradition that Chomsky situates himself within is one that wants to increase

discussion, participation, and cooperation between people to achieve desired ends. Our knowledge about ideas of the good society and justice are complex and frequently contradictory, and as a consequence the only way to resolve such issues is through rational argument and criticism. As Chomsky stresses, the goal of social change is an ongoing movement towards more liberated forms of social order, not to assume that an end-point utopia is a viable or even an attractive option. In part, it is just this kind of need for greater discussion and participation that fuels Chomsky and Herman's critique of the U.S. mainstream news media. Politics is just as much a practical-dialogic project on Chomsky's understanding as it is for Foucault. While we do not have to accept either Chomsky's account of human nature or his libertarian socialist politics, the point remains that we still have to find grounds for political practice that enable us to talk meaningfully about the ethics of political activity, most importantly regarding issues of means and ends. As I suggested earlier, whereas Chomsky's account of human nature provides us with such grounds, it is far from clear that Foucault's anti-essentialist account does.

Finally, with regard to the question of Chomsky's political ideas in general, it is worth stressing, as he has suggested in various places himself, that the libertarian socialist tradition is not simply a product of Western history and the Enlightenment as postmodern and poststructuralist critics might suggest. On the contrary, as Peter Marshall has made clear in a comprehensive recent work, the ideas that have connected seemingly disparate libertarian movements over the ages have a diverse background.⁸³ The charge that the political lineage within which Chomsky situates himself is a particular Western one represents far too simplistic an understanding of the history of ideas to be allowed to stand.

There is no doubt a sense in which these responses are unsatisfactory in that there is no simple knock-down retort to be given that settles this debate about universality and particularity as seen through the eyes of Chomsky and Foucault. However, this is a problem only for those who would argue that politics and ethics require a degree of epistemological certainty that ends the need for debate and criticism—a series of transcendent commandments, if you like. Neither Chomsky nor Foucault see our claims about knowledge in this way: politics and ethics are practices that require analysis, argument, and action. What we do need are plausible grounds for our claims about

human nature, the good society, and justice, and it is in this search for such grounds that Chomsky's work offers us some useful insights.

Notes

1. A.I. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 140. All references to the television discussion between Foucault and Chomsky in this paper are taken from this book.
2. Letter to the author, 21 May 1992.
3. M. Nanda, "Restoring the Real: Rethinking Social Constructivist Theories of Science," *Socialist Register*, 1997; H. Lawson and L. Appignanesi (eds.), *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Postmodern World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
4. Antimodernism is interchangeable, in this respect, with constructivism.
5. See E. Wood, *Mind and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
6. D. Layder, *Understanding Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1994), pp. 94-113.
7. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, p. 131-32.
8. J. Rosenau, *The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy* (London: Frances Pinter, 1980), p. 32.
9. See Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* (London: Tavistock, 1976); *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* (London: Tavistock; 1977); *The History of Sexuality* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).
10. E. White (ed.), *Sociobiology and Human Politics* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1981); E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).
11. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, pp. 123-24.
12. W. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 13.
13. W.W. Sharrock, R.J. Anderson, and J. Hughes, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 116-19.
14. Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic; Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison; The History of Sexuality*. See also R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
15. See also Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); A.W. McHoul and W. Grace, *A Foucault Primer* (London: UCL Press, 1995); L. McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).
16. Foucault says, for example, "Truth is linked in circular fashion with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth." *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), p. 133.
17. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, pp. 131-32. See also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*; "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge*; J. Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake* (London: Routledge, 1995), chap. 1.
18. Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, chap. 1.
19. It should be stressed that social constructivist arguments are not simply synonymous with poststructuralism or postmodernism, but it is reasonable to

- suggest that they share important ideas in common such as the role that language plays in constructing what we take to be real.
20. See also Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; Layder, *Understanding Social Theory*, chap. 6; Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, pp. 115-19.
 21. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 133.
 22. J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 41.
 23. Foucault's own political activism is illustrative of this point. See D.M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).
 24. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, chap. 3.
 25. Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, pp. 77-78.
 26. See J. Squires (ed.), *Principled Positions* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993).
 27. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, p. 136.
 28. For an excellent account of Hobbes on language, see J.W. Danford, *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
 29. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, p. 138.
 30. J. Leiber, *Noam Chomsky: A Philosophical Overview* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1982), chaps. 1 and 2.
 31. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, p. 110.
 32. N. Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 161.
 33. N. Chomsky, *Language and Thought* (London: Moyer Bell, 1993).
 34. See R. Keat and J. Urry, *Social Theory as Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 128-29.
 35. N. Blaikie, *Approaches to Social Inquiry* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 165.
 36. M.C. Haley and R.F. Lunsford, *Noam Chomsky* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), p. 183.
 37. N. Chomsky, *Rules and Representations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 136.
 38. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, p. 125.
 39. Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, pp. 164-65. See also P. Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1997), chap. 3.
 40. Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, pp. 156-59, where he says, "this partial congruence between the truth about the world and what the human science-forming capacity produces at a given moment yields science. Notice that it is just blind luck if the human science-forming capacity, a particular component of the human biological endowment, happens to yield a result that conforms more or less to the truth about the world."
 41. Chomsky, *Rules and Representations*, p. 92.
 42. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
 43. Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, pp. 160-63.
 44. See T. Pateman, *Language in Mind and Language in Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); and A. Collier, *Critical Realism* (London: Verso, 1994).
 45. Chomsky, *Rules and Representations*, p. 219.
 46. D. Sylvan and B. Glassner, *A Rationalist Methodology for the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 1-9; Pateman, *Language in Mind and Language in Society*.

47. E. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (London: Pantheon Press, 1988); N. Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989); Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature*, chap. 5.
48. R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1979).
49. Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature*, chap. 5.
50. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.
51. N. Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects* (London: Pluto Press, 1996). In his essay "Language and Nature," Chomsky rejects two theses about the relationship between our language and what exists in the world: the Externalist and the Representationalist. Roughly speaking, externalism posits that our knowledge of the world and the meanings we attribute to it are imposed on us by our environment or the facts-of-the-world, a view that Chomsky finds problematic because such an account confronts and fails to answer adequately Plato's Problem: How are we able to construct the rich and complex forms of knowledge that we do on the basis of only partial and fragmented evidence? Representationalism is a thesis that argues that language and its properties can come to represent what exists in the world, a view often associated with logical positivism. Chomsky is equally critical of this and puts forward the following view about the relationship between language and things in the world: "The semantic properties of linguistic expressions focus attention on selected aspects of the world as it is taken to be by various cognitive systems, and provide perspectives from which to view them, as we use language for expressing or clarifying our thoughts, inducing others whose language resembles ours to do likewise, making requests, and in other ordinary ways. I think this is also probably the strongest general statement that can be made about the language-world relation" (p. 37). Chomsky's position is that language refers to real and independent things in the world.
52. Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects*, pp. 31-54.
53. M. Archer, *Realist Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).
54. See L. Doyal and R. Harris, *Empiricism, Explanation and Rationality* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 43-44 for an overview of Hume on causation and regularity.
55. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977 ed.), pp. 121-31.
56. Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, pp. 1-34.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
58. M. Haley and R. Lunsford, *Noam Chomsky*, p. 183.
59. N. Chomsky, "Interview With Noam Chomsky: Linguistics and Politics," *New Left Review*, no. 57 (1969): 21-34, p. 31.
60. Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, pp. 164-65.
61. Chomsky, "Interview With Noam Chomsky: Linguistics And Politics," p. 33.
62. Chomsky, "Interview With Noam Chomsky: Linguistics And Politics." In this interview (p. 32), Chomsky suggests that "[a] serious study of morals or of social systems would attempt the same thing. It would ask itself what kinds of social system are conceivable. Then it would ask itself what kinds have actually been realized in history and it would ask how these came into existence, given the range of possibilities that exist at some moment of economic and cultural development. Then, having reached that point, the next question is whether the range of social systems that human beings have constructed is broad or narrow,

- what is its scope, what are its potentialities, are there kinds of social system human beings could not possibly construct and so on. We have not really begun this kind of investigation. Hence it is only a guess when I say that the range of possible social systems may turn out to be very narrow. Of course, there is an enormous human significance in living in one social system rather than another, in capitalism rather than feudalism, for example."
63. N. Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (London: Random House, 1987), pp. 183-202.
 64. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, pp. 110, 126.
 65. D.J. Levy, *Political Order: Philosophical Anthropology, Modernity and the Challenge of Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987), p. 19.
 66. H. Bracken, *Mind and Language* (The Hague: Foris Publications, 1983).
 67. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, pp. 114-17.
 68. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-27. See Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, p. 157.
 69. N. Chomsky, "An Interview," *Radical Philosophy* 53 (Autumn 1989): 31-32.
 70. B. Barnes and D. Bloor, "Relativism, Materialism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in S. Lukes and M. Hollis (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982). Also, Doyal and Harris, *Empiricism, Explanation and Rationality*, pp. 100-70.
 71. Layder, *Understanding Social Theory*, pp. 95-97.
 72. For recent contributions on this point, see D.M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards A Gay Hagiography*.
 73. N. Chomsky, "Towards a Humanistic Conception of Education," in W. Feinberg and H. Rosemont (eds.), *Work Technology and Education* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 209; *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, p. 166.
 74. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, pp. 136, 138.
 75. A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983); R. Plant, *Modern Political Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); R. Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).
 76. Lyotard also makes this point when he argues that there are no transcendent grounds for evaluating ideas of justice. *The Postmodern Explained*, pp. 77-78.
 77. E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller, Jr., and J. Paul (eds.), *Foundations of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. vii.
 78. C. Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press), p. 160.
 79. N. Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 152.
 80. Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects*, pp. 70-93; K. Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985); Miller, "Social Justice and the Principle of Need," in M. Freeman and D. Robertson (eds.), *The Frontiers of Political Theory* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).
 81. Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, p. 140.
 82. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
 83. P. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1992).

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