CHOMSKY AND FOUPAULT ON HUMAN NATURE
– A PERSPECTIVE FOR RECONCILIATION

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Abstract:
Chomsky and Foucault are closer to each other in their views than it is often assumed. This paper focuses on the “Chomsky-Foucault debate”, and in particular on the most philosophical topic discussed in the book, namely the question of whether there is a human nature. This paper argues that the contrast is more one of focus and stress than one of deep philosophical disagreement. This fact is of interest for the present day continental-analytic debate, given the importance of the two authors for the respective schools of thought. A constructive approach should look for bridges and enhance the dialogue of the two schools; Chomsky and Foucault are excellent authors in this regard, both as role models and as foci of inquiry.

Key words: human nature, post-structuralism, knowledge, innateness, justice.

How close are Chomsky and Foucault in their views and recommendations? I want to argue that they are closer to each other than it is often assumed. I found them to be very similar in their political motivation, although they are divergent in their characterization of some of the intellectual means for implementing it. The issue is important for philosophy and “theory”, since it concerns the views of the central post-structuralist author, Foucault, and the views of the thinker who has been inspiring analytic philosophers for half a century. In this paper I want to focus on “Chomsky-Foucault debate”, and in particular on the most philosophical topic discussed, namely the question whether there is a human nature. The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature triggered my interest in the work of both Chomsky and Foucault some years ago, because in it these two influential thinkers bring up many questions concerning the existence of human nature, knowledge, the possibility of creating a scientific theory, the question of justice, civil disobedience, and the idea of an alternative future society.

In the first part of the debate, which is our philosophical topic here, Foucault and Chomsky debate the existence of human nature and notions of knowledge and science. While “human nature” for Chomsky stands for innate structures of the human mind which guide social and intellectual behaviour, for Foucault human nature is a mere concept created within our civilization. “Knowledge” to Chomsky represents human’s cognitive precognitions or innate structures for creating knowledge and shaping scientific theories, while for Foucault “knowledge” stands for the organization of a particular body of claims in a particular historical moment; he addresses the cultural conditions surrounding a particular body of claims in a particular historical period. What is interesting to me is that in the debate they are not opposed to one another but simply observing particular concepts from different perspectives: the concept might be the same, but conceptions differ. (Regarding the second, political element of the debate, Chomsky is focused on the creation of an alternative society based on human nature that will ensure human freedom. However, in this part of the debate Foucault is restrained and maintains the position of the present historical moment and focuses on disclosure of political power which controls and shapes the social body. Regarding the question of resistance present in an act of civil disobedience, these two intellectuals disagree in theory. For Chomsky civil

1 I wish to thank Anna Loutfi and David Weberman from Central European University, Budapest, for their help with the manuscript from which the present paper derives.
disobedience is necessary in order to put pressure on the government, whilst for Foucault it is just an act within the state framework, so it is not so meaningful. On the question of “justice” they also disagree as much as, “justice” for Chomsky is an essential characteristic of human nature and any future society that should be built on it, while for Foucault it is, again, just a concept created within our civilization; although in his critique of power which creates inequalities, it seems that he has a strong sense of justice. Finally, while Foucault is really careful regarding his vision of future society, Chomsky is optimistic concerning the creation of a better society in which human freedom will be imperative; there is, for Chomsky, a better world that humans should aspire to.

The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature

In *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature* Chomsky and Foucault can be seen as belonging to two different traditions within the Left. Chomsky agrees with the anarchist tradition which argues for the existence of a universal human nature and hopes for a society that can be built upon it. Foucault argues against the existence of human nature and views ideas concerning justice or human nature as constructivist, claiming that they are just cultural constructs that can be deconstructed. Within this debate of such intellectual depth, they show in which different directions the Left can go in its political thinking. The debate itself was set up in a tense political moment during the seventies; a moment characterized by a pronounced reaction against the establishment. The questions raised in the debate are prominent again in today’s historical moment which is also high-strung and characterized by a strong economic crisis of the neo-liberal system.

Going a few decades back to the 1960s and 1970s, both Chomsky and Foucault were well known left-orientated intellectuals deeply involved in politics; they are, so to say, “public intellectuals”. Their work in academia was intertwined with their analysis of public discourse, activism and the critique of contemporary political systems, and both argued for social change that was seen as a necessary move at that particular moment. Namely, the debate took place in 1971, which was a period of crisis and the critique of existing order was articulated through the politics of the “New Left”. The “New Left” was a Marxist movement spreading within Europe as well the United States, advocating social change, with Herbert Marcuse, associated with the Frankfurt school of critical theory, as a leading figure. The New Left was a cultural as well as political protest: “the newly awakened sensibility of the rebels is a political factor; the real fight was a political fight...” (Ehrmann 1970: 383).

Let me now pass to the debate which is our main topic. Its kernel is the television debate which took place in 1971 in the Netherlands. Foucault’s and Chomsky’s approaches towards the social sciences in the debate are different. Chomsky looks at humans from a cognitive perspective and gives a positive stand on human nature which for him represents the cornerstone for the vision of a future society based on justice. On the other hand, Foucault is skeptical towards the idea of human nature which is, along with justice, just a concept created within our civilization. However, both Foucault and Chomsky have a common political agenda: both are leftists who give a profound critique of contemporary social order based on liberal capitalism, not contradicting one another, but simply observing the particular concepts like human nature or knowledge from different perspectives within a leftist framework. Maybe the best description for this debate comes from the introduction of Fons Elders, a Dutch philosopher, who introduces these two great intellectuals with the following words:

Perhaps the best way to compare both philosophers would be to see them as tunnellers through a mountain working at opposite sides of the same mountain with different tools, without even knowing if they are working in each other’s direction (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 1).

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3 To Wendy Brown “neo-liberal” stands for the arrangement characterized by the dominance of the free market which imposes an imperative of production and profit onto political and social life, as well as the state (Brown 2006: 694).

4 The “New Left” was opposed to earlier leftist movements associated with the Marxist-Leninist ideology carried out in the Soviet Union. At the time, Peter Kropotkin was raising warnings about the “red bureaucracy” referring to Bolsheviks and Lenin, who, in the October revolution in 1917 and the overthrow of the Czar and the existing regime established the Soviet Union, and after the death of Lenin in 1924, Stalin, who started building his authoritarian rule, notorious for its coercive bureaucracy and strong police. The New Left was distancing itself from this kind of Stalinism.
To start with the basic concept “human nature” which can be seen as a set of the characteristics common in all human beings; these characteristics are considered to be natural or intrinsic to humans and independent of culture, that is, from the external surroundings. Firstly, the philosophical aspect of the debate begins with the fundamental question of whether we are “are we the product of all kinds of external factors, or if, in spite of our differences, we have something we could call a common human nature, by which we can recognize each other as human beings” (Elders in Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 2). Chomsky argues that human beings are creative, and “creativity” for him means that a human being has the possibility to say what they mean and to understand what people say to them and this collection of abilities is called “knowing a language” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 2). So, “knowledge” for Chomsky indicates mastering language in an unconscious way. In order to explain his view, he begins with the creativity which exists in a child’s ability to understand new sentences that they have never heard before. At issue is here is the gap between a child who has a small quantity of data that somehow results in a complex and sophisticated knowledge (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 3). Furthermore, there is the phenomenon of individuals who have varied experiences in language (they have different stimuli; let’s say that one is exposed to a richer language stimuli then another) who inevitably reach congruent levels of knowledge; i.e. two English speakers, although they have different experiences with the language, can have the same knowledge of the English language, that is, they will be able to understand each other. Thirdly, people have different experiences which result in different limitations in a wide range of languages, and yet, a child can operate within the system of language (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 3). On the basis of these three arguments, Chomsky concludes that there is instinctive and innate knowledge; that this knowledge arises from a schematism according to which from a small amount of data it is possible to acquire a sophisticated knowledge; and moreover, that this instinctive knowledge is a fundamental constituent of human nature (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 4). As Chomsky claims in the debate “...this mass of schematism, innate organizing principles, which guide our social and intellectual and individual behaviour, that’s what I mean to refer to by the concept of human nature” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 4). It is clear here that Chomsky is concerned with the cognitive aspect of human beings; basically how humans are capable of creating language, a capability that is a universal human characteristic which represents the basis for his claim that there is such a thing as a universal human nature.

On the other side, Foucault does not see the concept of human nature as scientific. In his explanation he does not refer to cognitive aspects of human nature and in that understanding opposes Chomsky. Rather, Foucault talks about human nature as a concept within a particular science, so that basically they are talking about human nature from completely different points and not contradicting one another. Foucault states that “[i]n the history of knowledge, the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 7). In his elaboration, he compares two concepts – “life” and “human nature”. The concept of “life” which in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was used in studies of nature: the concept of “life” was used only in order to fix positions within the classification of human beings. “Life” was used simply to delineate biology as a science and to describe its object of study, rather than to describe the living beings. At the end of the eighteenth century, transformations in biological knowledge demonstrated new concepts in the science and also propagated particular notions which were used in order to delimit a certain type of scientific discourse (i.e. “life”) (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 6). So, for Foucault, the notion of life is a meta-concept which is used in order to describe other biological notions (i.e. reproduction, assimilation of food; any notion which concerns the living beings); it is not used in the discourse of living beings per se; it is a concept defined by science, an indicator for that which biology will define as a living being (i.e. something which reproduces, eats, dies, etc). Since “life” in itself is not a scientific concept but a concept defined by science in order to indicate something else, and “human nature” is an analogue to the concept of “life” in biology, what follows is that “human nature” also is not a scientific concept for Foucault.

I find Foucault’s answer to be exceptional, though I do not find it to be a contra argument for Chomsky’s notions of human nature. Foucault and Chomsky are opposed to the question of the mere existence of human nature; however, in their argumentation they are not contrary because they simply
argue from different positions. Foucault talks about the constitution of science which defines its concepts, in this case science defines “life” and science also defines “human nature”. Chomsky does not talk about the constitution of science or the organizing of the concepts that are used in the process of that constitution; Chomsky himself says that he talks about neural networks which are the property of human cognitive systems thanks to which a child can obtain a sophisticated system of language. This is something biologically given and unchangeable and, according to Chomsky, it is a constituent element of human nature (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 7). Furthermore, Chomsky agrees with Foucault’s claim that “life” is a concept within the biological sciences which can be used as an instrument in the process of a systematization of knowledge and he poses the following question in a pacifist tone: if the concept of life has taken biologists to the scientific understanding of life, could the concept of human nature lead to the scientific understanding of humans? In Chomsky’s words:

It seems to me that one might speculate a bit further [...] and ask whether the concept of human nature or of innate organizing mechanisms, or of intrinsic mental schematisms or whatever we want to call it, I don’t see much difference between them, but let’s call it human nature for shorthand, might not provide for biology the next peak to try to scale, after having – at least in the minds of the biologists, through one might perhaps question this – already answered to the satisfaction of some the question of what life is (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 7).

To conclude with the concept of human nature, Chomsky and Foucault can be seen as “climbing the same mountain from the opposite side” in the way that they are not juxtaposed to one another, but are simply making different claims. Chomsky talks about a universal human ability to acquire a system of language which can be called “human nature”, while Foucault talks about concepts around which a particular science is shaped, in which the claims are classified in a particular way in a particular historical period. Essentially, Chomsky who is in his work principally concerned with language, talks more about the biological and psychological precognitions of human beings: how they create knowledge, and shape scientific theory. Foucault, on the other hand, studied the history of ideas or systems of thought, the history of science, and is focused on the cultural treatment or the organization of a particular body of claims. He talks about “ideological” interpretation and readings of what human beings are and what they succeed in knowing, and he is more focused on the critique of political power which controls and shapes the whole social body.

The debate proceeds from Chomsky’s and Foucault’s claims on the existence of human nature towards knowledge. When talking about knowledge, Foucault and Chomsky start with the subject and the question of creativity. Foucault admits that he has given little thought to the creativity of individuals and he continues with the notion that he and Chomsky are in different positions apropos knowledge (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 15). In this context of knowledge and creativity, linguists before Chomsky were focused on the process of language formation and the rules present in that process rather than on the innovation present in language. Chomsky, a major critic of behaviourists, is focused on creativity in a cognitive sense, or creativity at a “lower level” as a normal human act, as he explains it (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 19-20), which I have mentioned above.5 In Foucault’s words:

Mr. Chomsky has been fighting against linguistic behaviourism, which attributed al-

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5 Chomsky claims that behaviourism is only concerned with behaviour and the control of behaviour (Chomsky 2005: 32). George Graham explains behaviourism as a doctrine according to which “behaviour can be described and explained without making ultimate reference to mental events or to internal psychological processes” (Graham 2010). According to Graham, behaviourism sees human behaviour to be constituted in relation to external elements, not internal ones. He distinguishes three types of behaviourism: methodological behaviourism focused on psychology and whose object is the behaviour of humans and animals (not on their mental conditions). Secondly, there is psychological behaviourism which is a branch of psychology eager to analyse behaviour in relation to different exterior physical stimuli. Thirdly, there is analytical or logical behaviourism which attempts to decode human reactions in different situations (Graham 2010). Chomsky was famously one of the harshest critiques of behaviourism arguing that behaviourism denied the creativity of the subject by claiming that human reaction is conditioned by external stimulus which creates a reflex (but why then do people have different reactions to same stimulus?) Chomsky, in his generative grammar, argues for the universals of human linguistic structure, unlearned but known, which permit and assist children to acquire human languages.
most nothing to the creativity of the speaking subject; the speaking subject was a kind of surface on which information came together little by little, which he afterwards combined. In the field of history of science, or, more generally, the history of thought, the problem was completely different (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 15).

In other words, in the history of thought, which was Foucault’s area of interest, more emphasis was placed on individual creation, while the rules of creation were left in the shadows (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 22, 23). Essentially, Foucault is impatient with creativity because it was too emphasized in the process of “discovery” within his area of interest. He describes how the history of knowledge had to obey two claims. The first is that of “attribution”, which imposed that each discovery had to be situated and dated, and had to have an inventor responsible for it; Foucault calls it “the principle of the sovereignty of the subject” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 16). The second claim does not refer to the subject but to the truth which is not constituted in history, a truth that is hidden and waits to be unveiled (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 16). Taking into account these two elements in the history of knowledge, Foucault concludes that knowledge in his area of interest (the history of science/thought) is always negative in relation to truth, or in Foucault’s words:

“It isn’t difficult to see how these two claims were adjusted, one to the other: the phenomenon of collective order, the “common thought”, the “prejudices” of the “myths” of a period, constituted the obstacles which the subject of knowledge had to surmount or to outlive in order to have access finally to the truth; he had to be in an “eccentric” position in order to “discover” (Foucault, Chomsky, 2005: 16).

Regarding these two imperatives, Foucault asks the question, “what if understanding were a complex, multiple, non-individual formation, not ‘subjected to the subject’ which produced effects of truth?” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 17). Foucault proposes a different perspective on knowledge according to which the generation of knowledge could be seen as collective, and not an individual practice. It is obvious that when Foucault talks about “understanding as a collective totality of rules allowing such and such a knowledge to be produced in a certain period” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 17), he speaks about an “episteme”; the three big structures – Renaissance, the classical period, and nineteenth century – which replace each other, but are separately internally fixed, which he famously introduced in The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. He demonstrates his point in the example of medicine which in the period from the 1770-1830 was completely transformed, which means that a completely new grid with new rules, decisions and limitations has occurred. That is to say, a new inner logic of medical understanding has occurred, or an entirely new “grille” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 18). In the history of knowledge, according to Foucault, there are two lines of inquiry: “according to one, one has to show how, under what conditions, and for what reasons the understanding modifies itself in its formative rules, without passing through an original ‘inventor’ discovering the ‘truth’; and according to the other, one has to show how the working of the rules of an understanding can produce in an individual new and unpublished knowledge” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 18).

It seems that creativity is connected with rules for Chomsky and Foucault, and that they are talking about the rules from different perspectives, which again is not contradictory. Foucault talks about them from the social point of view: episteme, or rules are in a juxtaposed position towards the creativity of the subject, that is, a certain understanding is always bounded within certain rules of a particular period. Meanwhile, for Chomsky, who speaks from the linguistic point of view, the rules are the condition of the creativity of the subject, meaning that a person who has mastered the system of rules knows how to use a language. Again, interestingly, they are not directly opposed, just speaking from different aspects. For example, if I was moderating this debate, I would ask Foucault what does he thinks about the human ability of acquiring a language and is that not a universal human ability that can be seen as human nature, and if not, how should that be described?

The debate shifts from creativity and knowledge to the possibility of creating a scientific theory from a small amount of data. To Chomsky that kind of achievement resembles the process in which a child reveals its own language. He claims the following:

If we really want to develop a theory of scientific creation, or for that matter artistic creation, I think we have to focus attention precisely on that set of conditions that, on one hand, delimits and restricts the scope of our possible knowledge, while at the same
time permitting the inductive leap to complicated systems of knowledge on the basis of a small amount of data. That, it seems to me, would be the way to progress towards a theory of scientific creativity, or in fact towards any question of epistemology (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 25).

Chomsky’s idea that, in order to develop a scientific theory, one has to focus on the limits of our possible knowledge and then to make an inductive leap drives Foucault to make a critique of the idea of “progress” and “growth”: both of these concepts arise from within a European understanding which, according to Foucault, turned out to be a universal understanding. He points out the principle of convergence which allows for many different ways of making several types of knowledge appear simultaneously, not just from the one direction of “progress” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 26, 27). Chomsky agrees with Foucault because he was not implying the idea of scientific progress as a matter of accumulated knowledge:

I didn’t think that scientific progress is simply a matter of the accumulated addition of new knowledge and the absorption of new theories and so on. [...] But it is precisely because of this property of our minds, which in detail we don’t understand, but which, I think, in a general way we can begin to perceive, which presents us with certain possible intelligible structures, and which in the course of history and insight and experience begins to come into focus or fall out of focus and so on; it is precisely because of this property of our minds that the progress of science, I think, has this erratic and jagged character that you [Foucault] describe (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 27, 38).

Chomsky is approaching Foucault’s claims about the rules which determine a particular knowledge when he describes behaviourism, which is, according to him

a negation of the possibility of developing a scientific theory. That is, what defines behaviourism is the very curious and self-destructive assumption that you are not permitted to create an interesting theory. [...] Behaviourism is the arbitrary insistence that one must not create a scientific theory of human behaviour; rather one must deal directly with phenomena and their interrelation... (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 34).

Chomsky looks at behaviourism not as a science, but as a set of limitations on the construction of a scientific theory, and it looks to me that this characterization of behaviourism sees its requirements as a grid (in Foucauldian terms) imposed. Here, in this point, they finally address an issue from the same perspective: questioning the rules of science that determine a particular subject-matter, in this case behaviourism, which deprived the creativity of the subject by focusing simply on their behavior, behaviour which is entirely conditioned by external conditions and has nothing to do with the internal matter of the subject.

One can conclude that, in the context of science, Chomsky talks about the cognitive aspects of human beings present in the process of creating a particular collection of knowledge, a process of creation that Foucault is skeptical of:

Where perhaps I don’t completely agree with Mr. Chomsky is when he places the principles of these regularities, in a way, in the interior of the mind of human nature. [...] But to say that these regularities are connected, as conditions of existence, to the human mind or its nature is difficult for me to accept. [...] Perhaps the point of difference between Mr. Chomsky and myself is that when he speaks of science he probably thinks of the formal organization of knowledge, whereas I am speaking of knowledge itself, that is to say; I think of the content of various knowledges which is dispersed into a particular society, permeates through society, and asserts itself as the foundation for education, for theories, for practices (Chomsky, Foucault 1005: 29, 30).

So, while Chomsky is talking about the intrinsic aspect of the human mind, Foucault is talking about a “second phase” which follows from Chomsky’s cognitive one. Again, they are not opposed in their claims, or in Chomsky’s words:

I think that illustrates very nicely the way in which we’re digging into the mountain form opposite directions, to use your [Elders’] original image. That is, I think that an act of scientific creation depends on two facts: one, some intrinsic property of the mind, another, some set of social and intellectual conditions
that exist. And it is not a question, as I see it, of which of these we should study; rather we will understand scientific discovery and similarly any other kind of discovery, when we know what these factors are and can therefore explain how they interact in a particular fashion, my particular interest, in this connection at least, is with the intrinsic capacities of the mind; yours [Foucault’s], as you say, is in the particular arrangement of social and economic and other conditions (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 32).

With the notions regarding the constitution of science the philosophical aspect which focused principally on the question of human nature is finished. The debate now turns toward politics which begins with Foucault’s explanation of the importance of politics, which is

probably the most crucial subject to our existence, that is to say the society in which we live, the economic production within which it functions, and the system of power which defines the regular forms and the regular permissions and prohibitions of our conduct. The essence of our life consists, after all, of the political functioning of the society in which we find ourselves. [...] Not to be interested in politics, that’s what constitutes a problem (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 37).

Beginning with Chomsky, well-known for his anarcho-syndicalism, or libertarian socialism, who argues that there is a connection between freedom, dignity and creativity. Following from this, there is a particular social organization in which those fundamental human characteristics could be achieved (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 42). The connection between anarcho-syndicalism and free, dignified, and creative human nature is that, according to Chomsky, “a fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work, for creative inquiry, for free creation without arbitrary limiting effects of coercive institution, then, of course, it will follow that a decent society should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristics to be realized” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 37). In short, for Chomsky, anarcho-syndicalism is an optimistic vision of future society: “a federated, decentralized system of free associations, incorporating economic as well as other social institutions” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 38). And thanks to the progress present in technology, in this kind of system workers could form independent assemblies and would no longer represent just a wheel in the productive process (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 39). Chomsky gives this vision of a future society because he sees it as a task. Essentially, he argues that there are two intellectual tasks. The first is focused on the creation of a just future society, while the second which detects the nature of power, oppression, terror and destruction (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 41).

On the other hand, in this story concerning human nature and future society, Foucault is much more careful: “...it is difficult to say exactly what human nature is. Isn’t there a risk that we will be led into error?” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 44). He does not have a vision of a better society but he firmly maintains the position of the present historical moment, claiming that to him it seems that “the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 41). He is concentrated on the disclosure of power which shapes society. As a true Marxist, he argues that state and its institutions are managed by a ruling class (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 40, 41).

In this political part of the debate the question of the disturbance of social order comes into focus, in particular in relation to a concrete activity which threatens the social order. Foucault and Chomsky are both known as activists but they have different stances towards civil disobedience. To Chomsky civil disobedience threatens the social order, but with the possibility of fascism passiveness is also a risky act (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 44, 45). For Foucault, civil disobedience is not an act of resistance as it is for Chomsky. For Foucault civil disobedience is “a legal, obligatory behaviour in violation of the commands of the state, which may not be legal” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 46). So it appears that civil disobedience for Foucault is ineffective because in practicing it one still exists in the framework of the commands of the state, while Chomsky sees the act of civil disobedience as a pressure directed towards the state.

Civil disobedience leads us to the question of justice. Chomsky opens up in this dialogue. He states very clearly that people are not in a position of creating a system of ideal justice and an ideal society because people are too limited and too biased; however, what people are in a position to do is imagine and organize a more just society (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 50). He separates “legality” and “justice” and claims that people should act in accordance with
the law if the law includes justice; but when a juridical apparatus is not organized around justice, people should confront that kind of system (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 51). Foucault has different ideas regarding justice; to him, “justice” as well as “human nature” are “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... (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 58).

Foucault views are, I would say, relativistic. He claims that the proletariat does not go into war contra ruling class because of justice, but because of power; he claims that “one makes war to win, not because it is just” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 51). I find his notions on justice interesting because although a relativist, it seems to me that Foucault nevertheless has a strong sense of justice which is evident in his critique of undemocratic political systems. Nevertheless, his relativistic notions are evident in his claim that in the war which the proletariat wages against the ruling class spiritus movens is not justice but a fight for power (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 51). My first question is, generally speaking, what is the goal of the proletariat’s fight in the first place? I mean, if the geometry of power is fairly designed in a society, that is, if society is built on justice, would the proletariat go to war for more power just in order to win more power? On a more grounded level, if we take into consideration the concrete example of the Soviet Union, which constituted a socialist state where the proletariat did overthrow the ruling class and established a centralized and authoritarian state greatly based on violence and control, Foucault’s caution makes sense. Foucault even goes a step further by claiming that “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” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 54). Basically, “justice” is a concept shaped by the subordinated and functions as a justification for oppression. Furthermore, in a classless society that kind of concept would be unnecessary (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 54).

Chomsky answers in a simple way by claiming that there is some basis of justice which resides in fundamental human qualities and that there is a “real” notion of justice that is so grounded together with true humanly valuable concepts such as love, kindness, sympathy, solidarity and so on (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 55). Chomsky says that the “social revolution that you’re trying to achieve is in the ends of justice, is in the ends of realizing fundamental human needs, not merely in the ends of putting some other group into power, because they want to” (Chomsky, Foucault 2005: 57). Here it is evident that Chomsky talks from a universal perspective while Foucault is much more careful because he takes into consideration the situation with socialism in Europe and Russia, where, in one moment, socialism took a wrong turn.

To conclude, behind every political philosophy there is an implicit or explicit stand regarding human nature. Today’s neo-liberal politics are based on the notion that human nature is negative and that everybody should be seen as an ‘enemy’ or, in today’s terminology, a ‘competitor’, in a world where private profit is imperative. The contemporary world is shaped with regard to profit; humans are subjected to renting themselves in markets and are subjected to a neo-liberal ethos which insists on individualism and competitiveness. Although anarchism can be seen as utopian and naive because it presumes that humans have a positive human nature, meaning that they are benevolent and have a sense of justice and altruism, it should be seen as a tool for raising consciousness against neo-liberal ideology, especially in this historical moment when we are witnessing an enormous worldwide economic crisis. In this kind of political situation, Chomsky’s and Foucault’s critique of social order, as well as Chomsky’s alternative vision of a society, and Foucault’s precaution, should be seriously taken into consideration.

**Conclusion: Bridging the Continental-Analytic Gap**

I have argued that the difference between Chomsky and Foucault, dominant in their debate, is more a difference of focus than a clash of contrary views. Chomsky argues from the cognitive aspect of human beings, focusing on innate structures which create knowledge, while Foucault is more focused on cultural conditions determining a particular body of claims in a certain period which is formed as “knowledge”. In the political context of the debate they differ regarding their future vision of society. While Chomsky proposes an idea of society based on rules which will guarantee freedom for humans, Foucault does not want to enter into speculations about the future; he remains in the present historical moment. Concerning justice, they differ inasmuch as Foucault has a relativist notion regarding justice, although he also has a strong sense of justice in his
analysis of power, while to Chomsky the idea of justice is the basis of human nature and a future society.

In a further in-depth analysis of the constitutive concepts of the debate within the greater scope of their work, they converge on a number of points. In the analysis of power and its modus operandi, Foucault argues that power runs through the whole social body and in that flow it creates inequalities; basically the society in which we live today is a successor of the bourgeois socio-economic order which is divided hierarchically and is undemocratic. Chomsky shares this criticism of power which for him is in the hands of governments and elites who control the rest of the society. Essentially, in this critique of society Chomsky and Foucault can be seen as converging. To Foucault the technology of power regulates the complete social body using different rules, while to Chomsky the masses are being regulated primarily through media which is possessed by those in power. This is also one of their points of convergences. Furthermore, both of them were (and Chomsky still is) passionate activists who shared the idea of resistance to power structures. To Chomsky civil disobedience is a way of rebellion against the existing socio-political order, and although Foucault claimed that this kind of resistance is not really meaningful because it is an act within the state’s framework (however, in his work he is not really clear what resistance is; he just claimed that it is undistinguishable from power), in practice he was a vigorous activist. The critique of knowledge, which is represented as neutral and truthful, coming from a formal institution, is also a point of convergence in their work. Namely, Foucault argues for genealogy as a possible anti-science towards verified knowledge from formal institutions. Similarly, in his study of counterrevolutionary subordination, Chomsky is critical towards the liberal scholarship which is devoted to the maintenance of the values and social order of liberal bourgeois democracy. In addition, both of them are critical towards intellectual elitism, as well as those on the Left.

The point in which they do split is on the question regarding the future. While Foucault is cautious and does not want to speculate about the future, remaining focused on the disclosure of political power which shapes the social body, Chomsky gives a vision of a future society, a better society based on justice. On the political side, taking into consideration the sad socio-political context of the crises of our time, the differences within the Left, in this case between Chomsky and Foucault, become evanescent. This means that not much energy should be spent in finding the theoretical divergences in their work and pushing them further, as both perspectives should be taken into consideration in order to finally achieve a Left hegemony in a political context. Their brilliant critique of power and its modus operandi, their critique of institutions and knowledge (which are far from objective and neutral as usually represented), their ideas regarding resistance to power structures and the importance of it, Chomsky’s idea of a better society and Foucault’s incisive caution regarding this all should be taken into consideration in thinking about a more democratic society.

On the philosophical side, it is important to stress their convergence since it promises a more fruitful dialogue between continental and analytic philosophy. After all, as we already stressed, Foucault is the central post-structuralist author, whereas Chomsky is the thinker who has been inspiring analytic philosophers for half a century. Their dialogue should be a paradigm of how the two schools of thought can come to mutual understanding.

References


