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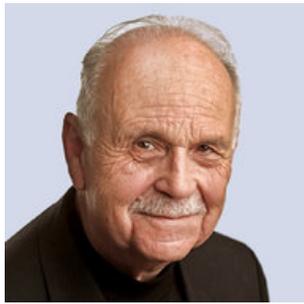
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# Scholarship and Politics: The Case of Noam Chomsky

By STANLEY FISH

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It's not often that you get a public confirmation of views you've been pushing for years. But that's what happened to me last week when I attended the 2013 John Dewey lectures given by Noam Chomsky under the auspices of the Columbia University philosophy department.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times Stanley Fish

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The views I have been peddling to various audiences (without notable success) are: (1) The academy is a world of its own, complete with rules, protocols, systems of evaluation, recognized achievements, agreed-on goals, a roster of heroes and a list of tasks yet to be done. (2) Academic work proceeds within the confines of that world, within, that is, a professional, not a public, space, although its performance may be, and often is, public. Accordingly, (3) academic work is only tangentially, not essentially, political; politics may attend the formation of academic units and the selection of academic personnel, but political concerns and pressures have no place in the unfolding of academic argument, except as objects of its distinctive forms of attention. (If academic work had no distinctive forms of attention, it would be shapeless and would not be a thing.) (4) The academic views of a professor are independent of his or her real-world political views; academic disputes don't track partisan disputes or vice versa; you can't reason from an academic's disciplinary views to the positions he or she would take in the public sphere; they are independent variables.

Now, as everyone knows, Noam Chomsky is a distinguished academic, a scholar who pretty much single-handedly

reconfigured the discipline of linguistics and a strong presence in the landscape of other disciplines — philosophy of mind, psychology, biology, literary criticism, to name a few. But Chomsky is also a prominent public intellectual whose opinions on a wide range of political topics — American foreign policy, the Middle East, capitalism, fossil fuels, education, etc. — are well known and often controversial. So the question was, which Chomsky was going to show up at Columbia, or alternatively, could you have one without the other? The answer, it turned out, is “yes.”

Chomsky gave three lectures under the general title “What Kind of Creatures are We?” The answer given in the first lecture — “What is Language?” — is that we are creatures with language, and that language as a uniquely human biological capacity appeared suddenly and quite late in the evolutionary story, perhaps 75,000 years ago. Language, then, does not arise from the social/cultural environment, although the environment provides the

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stuff or input it works on. That input is “impoverished”; it can’t account for the creativity of language performance, which has its source not in the empirical world, but in an innate ability that is more powerful than the stimuli it utilizes and plays with. It follows that if you want to understand language, you shouldn’t look to linguistic behavior but to the internal mechanism — the Universal Grammar — of which particular linguistic behaviors are a non-exhaustive expression. (The capacity exceeds the empirical resources it might deploy.)

In his second lecture (“What Can We Understand?”), Chomsky took up the question of what humans are capable of understanding and his answer, generally, was that we can understand what we can understand, and that means that we can’t understand what is beyond our innate mental capacities. This does not mean, he said, that what we can’t understand is not real: “What is mysterious to me is not an argument that it does not exist.” It’s just that while language is powerful and creative, its power and creativity have limits; and since language is thought rather than an addition to or clothing of thought, the limits of language are the limits of what we can fruitfully think about. Nor, Chomsky declared, are those limits capable of being enlarged or transcended in time. This is as good as it gets. There is “no evolution in our capacity for language.” These assertions are offered as a counter to what Chomsky sees as the over-optimistic Enlightenment belief — common to many empiricist philosophies — that ours is a “limitless explanatory power” and that “we can do anything.” Our limits, he concluded, should not be lamented, for the fact of limits enables perception and predication, “If there were no limits,” everything would be mush, and “there would be no scope” for definite action. (Here we might think of Wordsworth’s great sonnet, “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room.”)

In the third lecture (“What is the Common Good?”) Chomsky turned from the philosophy of mind and language to political philosophy and the question of what constitutes a truly democratic society. He likened dogmatic intellectual structures that interfere with free inquiry to coercive political structures that stifle the individual’s creative independence and fail to encourage humanity’s “richest diversity.” He asserted that any institution marked by domination and hierarchy must rise to the challenge of justifying itself, and if it cannot meet the challenge, it should be dismantled. He contrasted two accounts of democracy: one — associated by him with James Madison — distrusts the “unwashed” populace and puts its faith in representative government where those doing the representing (and the voting and the distributing of goods) constitute a moneyed and propertied elite; the other — associated by him with Adam Smith (in one of his moods), J. S. Mill, the 1960s and a tradition of anarchist writing — seeks to expand the franchise and multiply choices in the realms of thought, politics and economics. The impulse of this second, libertarian, strain of democracy, is “to free society from economic or theological guardianship,” and by “theological” Chomsky meant not formal religion as such but any assumed and frozen ideology that blocked inquiry and limited participation. There can’t, in short, be “too much democracy.”

I was enchanted, even ravished, by these lectures, not because I agreed with the positions they staked out, but because of the spectacle they presented of an intelligence exercising itself on a set of significant philosophical questions. It was thought of the highest order performed by a thinker, now 85 years old, who by and large eschewed rhetorical flourishes (he has called his own speaking style “boring” and says he likes it that way) and just did it, where “it” was the patient exploration of deep issues that had been explored before him by a succession of predecessors, fully acknowledged, in a conversation that is forever being continued and forever being replenished.

Yes, I said to myself, this is what we — those of us who bought a ticket on this particular train — do; we think about problems and puzzles and try to advance the understanding of them; and we do that kind of thinking because its pleasures are, in a strong sense, athletic and provide for us, at least on occasion, the experience of fully realizing whatever capabilities we might have. And we do it in order to have that experience, and to share it

with colleagues and students of like mind, and not to make a moral or political point.

As I listened I imagined a member of the audience (at least of the first two lectures) who came to hear a disquisition on the nature of language and mind and left with an understanding of what had been said but without knowing anything of Chomsky's political views. At first glance it might seem to be different in the case of the third lecture, which addressed an explicitly political topic. But here, too, the mode of interrogation was more analytic than polemical: the two concepts of democracy were laid out and explicated by reference to their distinguished expositors. To be sure, it was clear which one Chomsky preferred, but that preference led to no particular political recommendation, only the recommendation that we should strive for "social arrangements that are conducive to the rights and welfare of people." That, however, is (as Chomsky observed) a universally accepted truism: it would be hard to imagine someone on the other side standing up for social arrangements that had the effect of undermining a citizenry's welfare and violating its rights (although of course there are plenty of governments that do just that).

One could of course draw a line from the truism to a criticism of particular regimes and policies, but that Chomsky declined to do, except in the question and answer period where students who were eager for a political payoff asked him pointed questions of the kind he avoided in the lectures: How can we ameliorate inequality? What do you think of the situation in Venezuela? What is your view of educational reform? He answered firmly but mildly, and got off a few zingers, one of which I couldn't agree with more. Educational reform, he said, is "a euphemism for the destruction of public education." So the political Chomsky did show up, but only at the very end and not in a way that compromised the essential academic tenor of the event.

At the conclusion of each lecture, Chomsky received a thundering round of applause; by the third day the applause was deafening and sustained; it refused to stop. The applause, I am certain, was not for the specific points being made — points Chomsky has been making in some form for more than 50 years — but for the exemplary nature of the performance. The term "master class" is a bit overused, but I feel no hesitation in using it here. It was a master class taught by a master, and if someone were to ask me what exactly is it that academics do, I would point to these lectures and say, simply, here it is, the thing itself.

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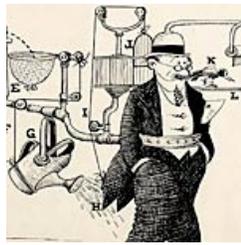
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