

Anti-Marxist myth of our time

**Chris Knight examines Noam Chomsky's 'scientific' fairy
tales about language and its origins**

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“If Marx were alive today, he would reject a good deal of the corpus of work that we call Marxism.”¹ Noam Chomsky’s words recall Marx’s own rueful verdict, as recorded by Engels: “If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist.”²

“Now, as for dialectical materialism,” Chomsky went on, “in my view this is a rather obscure notion ... It is clear that people do use the word ‘dialectic’ as if they understood it, but I personally have never understood it. In fact, my own feeling is that it is a kind of ritual term which people use when they are talking about situations of conflict and so on. Personally, I do not find it a very useful idea.”³

Chomsky continued: “As for my own methods of investigation, I do not really have any. The only method of investigation is to look hard at a serious problem and try to get some ideas as to what might be the explanation for it, meanwhile keeping an open mind about all sorts of other possibilities. Well, that is not a method. It is just being reasonable, and so far as I know, that is the only way to deal with any problem, whether it is a problem in your work as a quantum physicist or whatever.”⁴

Chomsky was addressing a radicalised audience in Managua, Nicaragua, seven years after a popular insurrection in that city had overthrown the United States-backed Somoza dictatorship.⁵ Supportive of the speaker’s socialist politics, his listeners were struggling to reconcile the public figure they knew with that more distant Chomsky respected for his apparently incomprehensible linguistics. “What is the relationship between linguistics and politics?” someone asked.

Chomsky tried to explain: “Well, do these two concepts have anything to do with one another? They may. It could be that there’s a connection between the creative aspect of language use ... and the idea of a distinctively human need for productive and creative work (including intellectual work) under one’s own control — that is, control of producers over production — which is the essence of Marxist thought, among other intellectual traditions. So there may be a connection between these two things. They’re conceptually rather similar ...”⁶

His two interests may connect up, Chomsky conceded. But equally they may not. Where Marx is concerned, there is no connection at all. Even if “we try to extract ideas from Marx’s thought that are valuable for our enquiries today”, as Chomsky explained,

¹ N Chomsky *Language and problems of knowledge: the Managua lectures* Cambridge MA 1988, p189.

² Engels, quoting Marx in a letter to Eduard Bernstein of November 1882: K Marx, F Engels *CW* London 1987, p353.

³ N Chomsky *Language and problems of knowledge: the Managua lectures* Cambridge MA 1988, pp189-90.

⁴ *Ibid* p190.

⁵ In fact, seven years after. For US behaviour in response to the 1979 revolution, see N Chomsky, ‘Teaching Nicaragua a lesson’, in *What Uncle Sam really wants* Tucson 1992, pp40-46.

⁶ N Chomsky *Language and problems of knowledge: the Managua lectures* Cambridge MA 1988, pp195-96.

“we will find very little, I think, that has any bearing at all on the study of language, so in this sense his ideas neither hamper nor facilitate this study.”⁷

Two temptations

Few in that audience felt entirely satisfied and the arguments have rumbled on. A decade later, Chomsky was about to deliver a lecture in Delhi. Setting aside the usual niceties, his host — a certain professor Agnihotri of Delhi University — introduced the visiting speaker with a challenge. He was bewildered that a person “so deeply touched by human suffering” could ignore the roots of both happiness and suffering in his scientific work. Noam Chomsky, continued the professor, insisted on viewing language as a “purely biological cognitive system” unconnected with “sociological power-games”. But isn’t language a key tool used by the powerful to deceive, exploit and oppress? How can Chomsky turn a blind eye to such things in his linguistic research?⁸

“I am torn between two temptations,” Chomsky replied in rising to speak: “One is to talk about the interesting set of questions that were just raised. The other is to talk about the topic that I was asked to talk about, which is a rather different one.”⁹ He had come prepared to talk about the design features of language, a purely scientific question.

“I’d like to talk about the questions that professor Agnihotri just raised, but perhaps it would be best to put that off until the discussion,” Chomsky ventured. Commotion in the hall. A section of the audience were protesting: “No.” “Can you hear me? Probably you can’t hear me,” Chomsky is recorded as saying. The rumblings continued. “If you say ‘no’, then you can,” he ruled. Still, he decided to delay no longer in answering the professor’s question:

“The short answer to the question of the relation between the two topics is that, yes, I am interested in both. One concerns language as a biological organ — it is pretty clear that it is — and this, I think, gives quite a lot of insight into the essential nature of human beings. The other topic concerns human life and its problems and the use of language as a technique of exploitation and so on. But in that second domain there is nothing known of any depth, to my knowledge. People may pretend that there is and they may make it look complicated; that is the job of intellectuals. But the fact of the matter is that what is understood is pretty much on the surface and is easily available anyway.”¹⁰

The message was clear: linguistics — the subject Chomsky had been invited to discuss — is complicated and necessarily so, its findings not easily accessible to all. In this field, you need science. Politics is different. Here, deep understanding is impossible;

⁷ *Ibid* p178.

⁸ N Chomsky *The architecture of language* Oxford 2000, p30n.

⁹ *Ibid* p1.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p2.

things on this level are just too complicated. All you can do is try to be honest in describing what is happening, a task within everyone's reach. So it is confusing to discuss science and politics in the same lecture, in the same kind of language or in the same way. Both topics are certainly important, but let us keep them apart.

Many in that Delhi audience still seemed puzzled. Why was Chomsky so ambivalent? Was he, perhaps, holding something back? His two temptations seemed to pull him in opposite directions. He would invoke Rousseau, Marx and other great revolutionary thinkers as sources of political inspiration. Yet would any of these figures have shared his difficulties in connecting politics with science? Rousseau's 1762 treatise, *The social contract*, was both scholarly and incendiary. Marx intended his *Capital* to change the world. Is science itself not revolutionary? Why should the pursuit of truth — scientific truth about language, for example — require different methods or pull in a different direction from the pursuit of social equality and justice?

Contested Meanings

Since Chomsky in his Delhi lecture declined to elaborate, the footnotes to the printed text refer us to his earlier book, *Knowledge of language: its nature, origin and use*. As an ordinary citizen, it is here explained, Chomsky is much concerned with the political use of language. He notes, for example, that following the 1962 American invasion of South Vietnam the vocabulary used by the invaders covered up their crime to an astonishing extent — so much so that it was impossible to talk publicly about the invasion, whether in opposition or support. If you mentioned it either way, no-one would even know what you were talking about: the very concept had been deleted from the public mind.

“For the past 22 years,” as Chomsky explained (speaking in this case in 1984), “I have been searching in vain to find some reference in mainstream journalism or scholarship to an American invasion of South Vietnam in 1962 (or ever), or an American attack against South Vietnam, or American aggression in Indochina — without success. There is no such event in history ...

“Within the mainstream, there is no-one who can call an invasion ‘an invasion’ or even perceive the fact; it is unimaginable that any American journalist would have publicly called upon the South Vietnamese to resist the American invasion. Such a person would not have been sent to a psychiatric hospital, but he would surely not have retained his professional position and standing. Even today, those who refer to the US invasion of South Vietnam in 1962, intensified in 1965, are regarded with disbelief: perhaps they are confused, or perhaps quite mad.”¹¹

¹¹ Address given at the Community Church of Boston, December 9 1984 and reprinted as ‘Afghanistan and South Vietnam’ in J Peck (ed) *The Chomsky reader* London 1988, pp223-26. The quotation is on pp225-26.

Chomsky cites this and other examples to illustrate what he terms “Orwell’s problem” — “the problem of explaining how we can know so little, given that we have so much evidence”.

The reason we know so very little, according to Chomsky, is simple. The state is “Orwellian” in that it constantly tells us lies. More accurately, those in positions of authority use words to mean the exact opposite of their dictionary meaning. In a deliberate echo of Orwell’s 1984, Chomsky explains: “*War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength*. The terms of political discourse typically have two meanings. One is the dictionary meaning and the other is a meaning that is useful for serving power — the doctrinal meaning.

“Take *democracy*. According to the common-sense meaning, a society is democratic to the extent that people can participate in a meaningful way in managing their affairs. But the doctrinal meaning of *democracy* is different — it refers to a system in which decisions are made by sectors of the business community and related elites.

“Or take *free enterprise*, a term that refers, in practice, to a system of public subsidy and private profit, with massive government intervention in the economy to maintain a welfare state for the rich. In fact, in acceptable usage, just about any phrase containing the word ‘free’ is likely to mean something like the opposite of its actual meaning.”¹²

Chomsky takes his condemnation of such practices to be just common sense. It may be descriptively accurate, but this kind of thing is not science. For the truly *scientific* linguist, everything works on such a different level as to be essentially unrelated. For the scientist, the interesting problem is not Orwell’s at all — it is Plato’s.

From Chomsky’s perspective, Orwell’s problem is important, but only in human or political terms. It is not scientifically challenging. The uses of language are far too variable and complex to have anything to do with science. *Scientific* linguistics addresses Plato’s utterly different challenge — “the problem of explaining how we can know so much, given that we have such limited evidence”.¹³ Since we are born with language, from this Platonic perspective, we know things which no amount of propaganda can suppress.

Note how ‘Orwell’ and ‘Plato’ in this picture invert one another’s core assumptions. Chomsky’s quarrel with Orwell’s 1984 is that it is too pessimistic — the novelist does not sufficiently acknowledge the human instinct to see through and resist the propaganda of the state. Chomsky endorses Plato in a spirit of optimism: there are truths which just *cannot* be erased from the mind. Chomsky has dedicated his professional life to the task of safeguarding the disconnect between Orwell and Plato, thesis and antithesis, politics and science. If they tug him in opposite directions, it is because in his view it is vital to keep them apart. The assumptions on each side have nothing in common. Exploring mind and language through Orwell’s conceptual framework — essentially a Marxist one — allows no escape from politics. Only by adopting Plato’s

¹² N Chomsky *What Uncle Sam really wants* Tucson 1992, pp86-87.

¹³ N Chomsky *Knowledge of language: its nature, origin and use* London 1986, pxxv.

wholly different philosophical approach, Chomsky informs us, can we study mind and language within the framework of science.

Plato's problem

Science, for Chomsky, is the study of nature. In the case of human nature, this means turning from Orwell's problem to Plato's. Chomsky explains: "In *The Meno* Socrates demonstrates that an untutored slave boy knows the principles of geometry by leading him, through a series of questions, to the discovery of theorems of geometry. This experiment raises a problem that is still with us: How was the slave boy able to find truths of geometry without instruction or information?"¹⁴

To Plato, it seemed clear that the boy's knowledge must have been remembered from some earlier existence. Subject to terminological change, Chomsky agrees: "How can we interpret this proposal in modern terms? A modern variant would be that certain aspects of our knowledge and understanding are innate, part of our biological endowment, genetically determined, on a par with the elements of our common nature that cause us to grow arms and legs rather than wings. This version of the classical doctrine is, I think, essentially correct."¹⁵

Plato's problem, continues Chomsky, "arises in a striking form in the study of language, and something like the answer just suggested seems to be the right one". How is it that a child beginning to speak appears to us so creative and clever? Is it receiving lessons from some mysterious source? Why does more grammar come out from its head than could possibly have gone in? The right answer, says Chomsky, is that the child is not learning from experience at all. Rather it is growing up in accordance with its nature, like a nestling developing wings. The child knows the basics already, its task being to recall that knowledge from an 'earlier existence' — in modern terms, from its genes.¹⁶

A bold speculation

Prior to Chomsky's intervention in the 1950s, American linguistics was heavily under the influence of behaviourism. The core doctrine was that behaviour is all that matters — 'mind', being unobservable, is a fanciful notion which scientists should ignore. In the United States, the leading representative of this school insisted that a child acquires language by learning it from adult teachers, much as a laboratory rat learns its way around a maze.

¹⁴ N Chomsky *Language and problems of knowledge: the Managua lectures* Cambridge MA 1988, p4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Chomsky replied: “It is simply not true that children can learn language only through ‘meticulous care’ on the part of adults who shape their verbal repertoire through careful differential reinforcement, though it may be that such care is often the custom in academic families. It is a common observation that a young child of immigrant parents may learn a second language in the streets, from other children, with amazing rapidity, and that his speech may be completely fluent and correct to the last allophone, while the subtleties that become second nature to the child may elude his parents despite high motivation and continued practice.”¹⁷

The lines are from a 1959 book review, arguably the most influential one in history. Human children, objected Chomsky, are not rats. Children come into the world *equipped already* with the basics of language: “The fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specially designed to do this, with data-handling or ‘hypothesis-formulating’ ability of unknown character and complexity.”¹⁸

How might the system work? In 1959, Chomsky seemed open to all sorts of possibilities, including “reinforcement”, “casual observation”, “natural inquisitiveness”, “a strong tendency to imitate” and various other things. The relevant mechanisms, Chomsky continued, “may be largely innate, or may develop through some sort of learning or through maturation of the nervous system.” However, “It is clear,” he concluded, “that what is necessary in such a case is research, not dogmatic and perfectly arbitrary claims ...”¹⁹

Despite such apparent open-mindedness, however, Chomsky was already drawn toward one particular hypothesis: “As long as we are speculating, we may consider the possibility that the brain has evolved to the point where, given an input of observed Chinese sentences, it produces (by an *induction* of apparently fantastic complexity and suddenness) the rules of Chinese grammar, and given an input of observed English sentences, it produces (by, perhaps, exactly the same process of induction) the rules of English grammar ... If clearly recognised as such, this speculation is neither unreasonable nor fantastic; nor, for that matter, is it beyond the bounds of possible study.”²⁰

According to this speculation, there is no gradual process — no uphill struggle, as the child solves the learning problems it encounters in incremental steps. Instead, the child homes in on a single solution with “fantastic complexity and suddenness”. First, it has no mastery. Then, in an instant, its mastery of language is complete. Chomsky has remained committed to this extraordinary speculation throughout his life.

¹⁷ N Chomsky ‘A review of BF Skinner’s Verbal behavior’ in *Language* 35(1): 26–58, 1959.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The uses of enchantment

Chomsky favours his speculation not because it is true, but because it is science. Science, for Chomsky, has nothing to do with data collection or description. Instead, you reach for ‘deep’ explanation by means of obvious ‘fables’. The instantaneous acquisition idea cannot literally be true. But, scientifically speaking, it is as if it were true. It is a fairy story — but a good one, a useful one. Fairy tales simplify the world and that is the whole point. Chomsky does not quite use the word ‘metaphor’ in this context, but he might have done. A metaphor is a false statement — but an acceptable one because it is *patently* false.²¹ Like any metaphor, Chomsky’s fable is false on one level, but true on another — true on the ‘deep’ level which counts.

Chomsky is celebrated for his fables, and they add up to an astonishing — some might say, infuriating — picture of the world. Here are some of the more notorious ones:

- A child acquires language not incrementally, but in an instant.
- Language was bestowed on the human species by a cosmic ray shower.
- The new biological capacity was perfect, as if installed by a divine architect.
- All word meanings (past, present and future) were fixed in the genome at this time.
- The first human to speak, being alone in the universe, communicated only with herself.

Now, these statements cannot possibly be true. Taken literally, they are absurd. But, according to Chomsky, that is not a problem: *all* scientific models, he says, are contradicted by the evidence. Science is not *supposed* to be true in the way that political journalism, a good novel or a detailed empirical description might be true. “Science is a very strange activity,” as he puts it. “It only works for simple problems.”²² First, you produce a model, a fairy tale. Then you explore its explanatory power, following it wherever it might lead. You may encounter pressure to add qualifications and complications to accommodate various facts — details quite irrelevant to your abstract model. To do science you must resist such pressure. Where the evidence obstructs logic and simplicity, just stick to the fairy tale.

²¹ “Generally speaking, it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implication” — D Davidson, ‘What metaphors mean’, S Sacks (ed) *On metaphor* Chicago 1979, pp29-45. The quotation is on p40.

²² N Chomsky *The architecture of language* Oxford 2000, p2.

Mastering language in an instant

With this in mind, let us examine Chomsky’s core ideas. We will start with the one about instantaneous language acquisition. Chomsky accepts that this cannot possibly be true: no child ever mastered language in an instant. But the abstraction is valid for the purposes of science.

As he explains, “The serious empirical question is how much distortion is introduced by the abstraction. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, it seems that little if any distortion is introduced: it is as *if* the language appears instantaneously, by selection of the options available in the initial state. Despite great variation in experience, outcomes seem to be remarkably similar, with shared interpretations, often of extreme delicacy, for linguistic expressions of kinds that have little resemblance to anything experienced. That is not what we would expect if the abstraction to instantaneous acquisition introduced severe distortions.”²³

Essentially, this is Plato’s idea: the slave boy grasps the principles of geometry by recalling them from a previous life. The human child likewise grasps the principles of language, in this case by drawing on the ancestral knowledge it has inherited through its genes. Chomsky does not need to trail through the empirical evidence for this. It is probably there, he assures us. Indeed, the evidence is probably overwhelming. But it does not really matter. He is simply outlining the logical consequences of his hypothesis. If the child knows everything already, temporal processes and developmental stages are just not relevant.

Critics, of course, might suspect trickery here. Isn’t Chomsky abolishing precisely the weeks, months and years which his opponents might consider necessary for learning to succeed? Isn’t he thereby excluding by fiat the role played by learning and experience? But this is Chomsky’s point. He is allowed to legislate in this way — as any creative mind is allowed. For him, the challenge is not to internalise vast quantities of evidence about humans or other animals. What matters is whether the fable works. From the moment Chomsky joined the Research Laboratory of Electronics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1955, his remit had been abstract and theoretical. The challenge was to design for military purposes a computational device — some kind of “language machine”.²⁴

It was a mechanical object, not a living creature. It did not have to be actually manufactured: the design just had to be formalised somehow and written down. There was absolutely no reason why the mechanism should have to mature, progress through stages, learn from experience or in any other way mirror what happens in the real world. Chomsky’s remit was more limited and for that reason confronted him with a

²³ N Chomsky *Language and mind: current thoughts on ancient problems* — lectures presented at Universidade de Brasilia, part 2, p3. Published under the title ‘Linguagem e mente. Pensamentos atuais sobre antigos problemas’ in *Pesquisa Linguística* 3.4, 1998. Page references are to the English manuscript.

²⁴ See C Knight, ‘The Chomsky enigma’ *Weekly Worker* January 11 2007.

correspondingly simpler question. Could he assume, from the very outset, that there was not sufficient information coming from the environment anyway for his special mechanism to acquire language from an external source? If so, it made sense to ignore developmental stages and collapse the so-called ‘acquisition process’ into an instant.

The mutant

According to Chomsky, language was first bestowed on humanity by a cosmic ray shower. The radiation somehow frazzled the brain of an ancestor to produce the language organ — in an instant. Again, not a very likely story, but who cares? The question is whether it is a useful simplification — whether it works. If you are employed by MIT’s Research Laboratory of Electronics to design a device for the United States military, who needs the details of human evolutionary history? It is all quite irrelevant to the task in hand, hence no part of the fable you need.

According to Chomsky, the device is biological. On the other hand, it is nothing like what a biologist would expect. No matter where we look in the living world, “there is simply nothing with interesting similarities, which means that the language faculty appears to be biologically isolated in a curious and unexpected sense”.

Chomsky continues: “To tell a fairy story about it, it is almost as if there was some higher primate wandering around a long time ago and some random mutation took place, maybe after some strange cosmic ray shower, and it reorganised the brain, implanting a language organ in an otherwise primate brain.”²⁵

He hastens to stress that this is “not to be taken literally”; it is just “a story”. “But,” he insists, “it may be closer to reality than many other fairy tales that are told about evolutionary processes, including language.” Evolutionists are telling fairy tales all the time — Lamarckian ones, Darwinian ones, who cares? According to the task in hand, you just have to pick the story you need.

Chomsky imagines the pre-linguistic primate “wandering around” in complete social isolation: “It lacks the language organ, but it has something like our brain and other organs, including sensorimotor systems sufficiently close to ours, and also a conceptual-intentional system sufficiently close to ours so that it can think about the world more or less the way we do, in so far as that is possible without language. But it doesn’t have language and cannot articulate such thoughts — even to itself.”

A burst of radiation then suddenly “installs” the necessary device. The risk now is that the mechanism might not work. It might be *internally* well designed, yet who knows whether it will fit properly into the rest of the recipient’s brain? Maybe it won’t! Chomsky wonders whether some such misfortune might explain why gorillas cannot speak. Did they get hit by perfectly good cosmic rays, but without the new bits of their brains being legible to the old?

²⁵ N Chomsky *The architecture of language* Oxford 2000, p4.

“In fact it is conceivable,” he writes, “it is an empirical possibility, though extremely unlikely, that higher primates, say, gorillas or whatever, actually have something like a human language faculty but they just have no access to it.”

In the human case, by some lucky accident, our brains *do* have access to the new capacity. The module does nicely fit. The brain can ‘read’ the informational output produced. The symbol sequences *are* ‘legible’.

But precisely *how* legible? *How* good is the fit along the interface? Does the overall design appear clumsy and messy? Or is it strangely and mysteriously perfect?

A divine architect

A biologist, says Chomsky, might expect just a clumsy mess: “That wouldn’t be surprising in the least. That is what biological systems usually are; they are bad solutions to certain design problems that are posed by nature — the best solutions that evolution could achieve under existing circumstances, but perhaps a clumsy and messy solution.”²⁶

But is the design of language *really* such a mess? To understand what Chomsky is driving at, recall the situation at which we have arrived:

“The language faculty is part of the overall architecture of the mind/brain, interacting with other components: the sensorimotor apparatus and the systems that enter into thought, imagination and other mental processes, and their expression and interpretation. The language faculty *interfaces* with other components of the mind/brain.”²⁷

But how good a fit do we now have, assuming we need to connect both sides? In Chomsky’s words: “How perfectly does language satisfy the general conditions imposed at the interface? If a divine architect were faced with the problem of designing something to satisfy these conditions, would actual human language be one of the candidates, or close to it?”

Yes, answers Chomsky. It all fits together perfectly: “Recent work suggests that language is surprisingly ‘perfect’ in this sense, satisfying in a near-optimal way some rather general conditions imposed at the interface.”

Note that Chomsky is not suggesting language *really* was installed by a divine architect. That would be going too far. He is simply saying the story seems to work.

‘Carburettor’ and ‘jumbo jet’

When the language organ was installed, it did not just contain the basics of grammar. It also featured a mental lexicon. All the nameable concepts which could ever be

²⁶ *Ibid* p18.

²⁷ N Chomsky *Powers and prospects* London 1996, p29.

triggered or imagined — all the word meanings contained in all the world’s languages, past, present and future — were encoded in our genes as a result of those cosmic rays:

“There is overwhelming reason to believe that concepts like, say, *climb*, *chase*, *run*, *tree* and *book* and so on are fundamentally fixed.”²⁸

How do we know? Well, it is the same argument as before: such things are too complex to be explained in any other way. “They have extremely complex properties when you look at them,” observes Chomsky. From this it follows “that they’ve got to basically be there and then they get kind of triggered and you find out what sounds are associated with them”.

A lexical item — the English word ‘house’, for example — is a sound pattern associated with a concept. Every child comes into the world knowing what a house is, so it does not have to learn this as it grows up. It just has to connect its house concept with the locally appropriate sound. As Chomsky puts it, “There’s a fixed and quite rich structure of understanding associated with the concept ‘house’ and that’s going to be cross-linguistic and it’s going to arise independently of any evidence because it’s just part of our nature.”²⁹

The same applies to ‘climb’, ‘chase’, ‘tree’ and ‘book’. The child, then, does not have much learning to do. It just has to know which sound is associated locally with a meaning it already knows.

Of course, Chomsky is not restricting his theory to ‘climb’, ‘chase’, ‘tree’ and ‘book’. In principle, the idea must extend across the board. What about, say, ‘carburettor’? Or ‘bureaucrat’? Or ‘quantum potential’? It would be a messy theory which had to draw a line between innate meanings and socially constructed ones. Where exactly should we draw the line?

Chomsky thinks ‘book’ is a natural concept, but is that really true? Do hunter-gatherers need books? Did every child born during the Late Pleistocene come into the world knowing what a book was? If we include ‘book’, then why not include ‘carburettor’, ‘bureaucrat’ and so forth? It would make sense not to pick and choose. But then, as the philosopher Hilary Putnam has pointed out, to have given us an innate stock of notions which includes ‘carburettor’, ‘bureaucrat’, ‘quantum potential’ and so forth, “evolution would have had to be able to anticipate all the contingencies of future physical and cultural environments. Obviously it didn’t and couldn’t do this.”³⁰ The story surely breaks down at this point.

To the astonishment of everyone, Chomsky replied by following his theory to its logical extreme:

²⁸ N Chomsky *The architecture of language* Oxford 2000, p75.

²⁹ GA Olson, L Faigley, ‘Politics and composition: a conversation with Noam Chomsky’ *Journal of Advanced Composition* 11.1, 1991, pp1-36.

³⁰ H Putnam *Representation and reality* Cambridge MA 1988, p15. Putnam is criticising the “strong innateness hypothesis”, as presented by Gerry Fodor, one of Chomsky’s students. There is no difference between Chomsky’s and Fodor’s position.

“Acquisition of lexical items poses what is sometimes called ‘Plato’s problem’ in a very sharp form. As anyone who has tried to construct a dictionary or to work in descriptive semantics is aware, it is a very difficult matter to describe the meaning of a word, and such meanings have great intricacy and involve the most remarkable assumptions, even in the case of very simple concepts, such as what counts as a nameable thing. At peak periods of language acquisition, children are acquiring (‘learning’) many words a day, perhaps a dozen or more, meaning that that they are acquiring words on very few exposures, even just one. This would appear to indicate that the concepts are already available, with much or all of their intricacy and structure predetermined, and that the child’s task is to assign labels to concepts, as might be done with limited evidence, given sufficiently rich innate structure.”³¹

After elaborating this idea with respect to relatively ‘simple’ words such as ‘table’, he continued:

“Furthermore, there is good reason to suppose that the argument is at least in substantial measure correct even for such words as ‘carburettor’ and ‘bureaucrat’, which, in fact, pose the familiar problem of poverty of stimulus if we attend carefully to the enormous gap between what we know and the evidence on the basis of which we know it. The same is often true of technical terms of science and mathematics, and it surely appears to be the case for the terms of ordinary discourse. However surprising the conclusion may be that nature has provided us with an innate stock of concepts, and that the child’s task is to discover their labels, the empirical facts appear to leave open few other possibilities.”³²

When Chomsky says such things, it is hard to know what to think. How far is he prepared to take his fairy tales? “Thus Aristotle had the concept of an airplane in his brain, and also the concept of a bicycle — he just never had occasion to use them!” the philosopher Dan Dennett commented, adding that he and his colleagues find it hard not to burst out laughing at this point. Perhaps “Aristotle had an innate airplane concept,” Dennett continues, “but did he also have a concept of *wide-bodied* jumbo jet? What about the concept of an Apex fare *Boston-London round trip*?”³³

The first human to speak

According to Chomsky, the ancestral hominin who got hit by those cosmic rays at once started expressing her thoughts with correct grammar. Critics tend to be amazed at this idea: why would an isolated mutant produce any output at all? Why use perfect grammar if there is no-one around who could possibly understand? Chomsky sticks resolutely to his fable:

³¹ N Chomsky *New horizons in the study of language and mind* Cambridge 2000, p61.

³² *Ibid* pp64-66.

³³ D Dennett *Consciousness explained* London 1991, pp192-93.

“Actually you can use language even if you are the only person in the universe with language, and in fact it would even have adaptive advantage. If one person suddenly got the language faculty, that person would have great advantages; the person could think, could articulate to itself its thoughts, could plan, could sharpen, and develop thinking as we do in inner speech, which has a big effect on our lives. Inner speech is most of speech. Almost all the use of language is to oneself, and it can be useful for all kinds of purposes (it can also be harmful, as we all know): figure out what you are going to do, plan, clarify your thoughts, whatever. So if one organism just happens to gain a language capacity, it might have reproductive advantages, enormous ones. And if it happened to proliferate in a further generation, they all would have it.”³⁴

The pieces of the story, then, fit nicely together. As a scientific theory it is patently absurd, but at least it is internally consistent. Once Chomsky has decontaminated language of every last vestige of social or political life, he is stuck with the logical consequences. The first person to speak must have been muttering to herself. If language was ‘for’ anything at all, it must have been for some internal function: not *communicating* thoughts — just *formulating* them in the head. Since cultural and social evolution is irrelevant, the necessary concepts must have been present from the beginning — installed by those cosmic rays.

Revisiting Orwell’s problem

For Chomsky, Orwell’s and Plato’s problems are poles apart, yet not wholly unrelated. In fact, Chomsky’s most daring polemical move is to defend Plato by invoking Orwell in his defence. How does this unexpected logic work? Well, a constant barrage of Orwellian state propaganda, claims Chomsky, is the only conceivable explanation for the observable fact that Platonic truth — against all the evidence — has been so effectively smothered and suppressed.

For Chomsky, it is blindingly obvious that there is such a thing as human nature. The mere fact that his own granddaughter (but not a rock or a monkey) can speak is sufficient proof:

“Is my granddaughter no different from a rock, a salamander, a chicken, a monkey? A person who dismisses this absurdity as absurd recognises that there is a distinctive human nature. We are left only with the question of what it is — a highly nontrivial and fascinating question, with enormous scientific interest and human significance.”³⁵

Why, then, do intellectuals so tirelessly avoid addressing this hugely important question — important both scientifically and politically? What self-serving motives can possibly lie behind these people’s bizarre doctrine that language, for example, is cultural and social? Why, moreover, do they disseminate such patent falsehood in the name of ‘science’?

³⁴ N Chomsky *On nature and language* Cambridge 2002, p148.

³⁵ Interview conducted in May 1995 *Red and Black Revolution* No2, 2001, pp17-21.

“When some doctrine has such a powerful grip on the intellectual imagination over such a broad range and when it has little in the way of empirical support, but is rather in conflict with the evidence at every point, it is fair to ask why the beliefs are so firmly maintained. Why should intellectuals be so wedded to the belief that humans are shaped by the environment, not determined by their nature?”

“One possible answer,” he continues, “lies in the role that intellectuals characteristically play in contemporary — and not so contemporary — society. Since intellectuals are the ones who write history, we should be cautious about the alleged ‘lessons of history’ in this regard; it would not be surprising to discover that the version of history presented is self-serving, and indeed it is. Thus the standard image is that the intellectuals are fiercely independent, honest, defenders of the highest values, opponents of arbitrary rule and authority and so on. The actual record reveals a different story. Quite typically, intellectuals have been ideological and social managers, serving power or seeking to assume power themselves by taking control of popular movements of which they declare themselves to be the leaders. For people committed to control and manipulation it is quite useful to believe that human beings have no intrinsic moral and intellectual nature, that they are simply objects to be shaped by state and private managers and ideologues — who, of course, perceive what is good and right.”³⁶

Chomsky will not quite commit himself to this style of explanation. He treats it as merely a “possible answer” to the question he has posed. Still, he invites us to consider it seriously. “I rather suspect that these speculations about the otherwise quite surprising appeal of environmentalist views,” he observes, “has more than a little truth to it.”³⁷

Chomsky is not averse to turning the weapons of his enemies against those same enemies themselves.

Reason and revolution

The problem, says Chomsky, is not new. As the history of religion all too clearly shows, entire populations for millennia have been induced to believe things “completely without foundation and often plainly at variance with obvious facts about the world around us”. While our genes give us insight, state propaganda takes it away. The problem is a political one — “Orwell’s problem” in its most general form. To solve it, “we must discover the institutional and other factors that block insight and understanding in crucial areas of our lives and ask why they are effective”.³⁸ This, of course, falls within the remit of politics, religious history and the sociology of knowledge — fields decisively shaped by Marx’s revolutionary ideas.

³⁶ N Chomsky *Language and problems of knowledge: the Managua lectures* Cambridge MA 1988, pp165-66.

³⁷ *Ibid* p166.

³⁸ N Chomsky *Knowledge of language: its nature, origin and use* London 1986, pxxvii.

The human mind, then, is a meeting-place between Platonic good and Orwellian bad. Alongside our capacities for self-serving ideology and deception, we have sophisticated capacities for insight and understanding, empathy and concern. What must socialists do in order to have some hope of fostering the good in us all? At this point, Chomsky turns for inspiration to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, pioneering social scientist and prophet of the 1789 French Revolution: “One of the earliest and most remarkable of the 18th century investigations of freedom and servitude,” writes Chomsky, “is Rousseau’s *Discourse on inequality* (1755), in many ways a revolutionary tract.”

In it, Rousseau seeks to “set forth the origin and progress of inequality, the establishment and abuse of political societies, insofar as these things can be deduced from the nature of man by the light of reason alone”.³⁹

His conclusions, Chomsky notes, appeared so shocking to the judges of the prize competition of the Academy of Dijon (to whom the work had been submitted) that they refused to hear the manuscript through.

Rousseau held that, “although the organ of speech is natural to man, speech itself is nonetheless not natural to him”.⁴⁰ Chomsky accepts this, interpreting it in terms of his own distinction between fixed genetic capacity and flexible social use. “Rousseau discusses the origin of language at some length,” continues Chomsky, “though he confesses himself to be unable to come to grips with the problem in a satisfactory way.” Rousseau, claims Chomsky, was forced to abandon his evolutionary speculations in the face of a conundrum. In order to invent speech, men had first to invent society. Yet in order to invent society, they had first to invent speech.

To resolve the conundrum, Chomsky goes back 100 years — back to Descartes. “The Cartesians,” he says, “cut the Gordian knot” by postulating the existence of mind as something quite separate from body. Since mind is incommensurable with body, the notion of its evolution from non-mind (ie, from a non-human precursor) is simply inconceivable. From a Cartesian standpoint, however, that presents no problem at all.

Contrary to Rousseau, claims Chomsky, there is “no need to explain the origin of language in the course of historical evolution. Rather man’s nature is qualitatively distinct: there is no passage from body to mind.”⁴¹

In the absence of such a “passage” — such an evolutionary transition — Chomsky resolves Rousseau’s conundrum with his story about a sudden mutation.

What he fails to mention is Rousseau’s own success in resolving the conundrum he had himself acknowledged. While denouncing ‘civilised’ society, Rousseau was no simple-minded worshipper of nature. He was well aware that other forms of society are possible. In fact, he argued persuasively that man is by nature a social animal and that rationality presupposes society for its expression. With the establishment of civil society, writes Rousseau in *The social contract*, men at last began governing themselves.

³⁹ Quoted in J Peck (ed) *The Chomsky reader* London 1988, p141.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* p146. Chomsky is quoting from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essay on the origin of languages*.

⁴¹ *Ibid* p147.

The founding contract *was an agreement between equals*. Reason became sovereign in human affairs because, for the first time, each had to consult his own conscience as the moral equal of anyone else:

“The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and giving his actions the morality they had formerly lacked. Then only, when the voice of duty takes the place of physical impulses and right of appetite, does man, who so far had considered only himself, find that he is forced to act on different principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.”⁴²

Why did language begin to evolve from this moment on? According to Rousseau, the explanation is simple: social equality exerted pressure to communicate in linguistic ways: “As soon as one man was recognised by another as a sentient, thinking being similar to himself, the desire or need to communicate his sentiments and thoughts made him seek the means to do so. These means can only be drawn from the senses, the only instruments by which one man can act upon another. Hence the institution of sensible signs to express thought. The inventors of language did not make this argument, but instinct suggested its conclusion to them.”⁴³

This, then, was Rousseau’s speculative theory of the origins of language. Revolutionary egalitarianism, cooperative instincts and “the institution of sensible signs” are all intimately intertwined — and have been so from the beginning.

Is this not as intriguing a “fairy tale” as Chomsky’s one about cosmic rays? Indeed, is it not rather *more* interesting, *more* testable and (all things considered) *more* likely to be true? Chomsky accuses the state of suppressing creativity and reason. Governments, he says (paraphrasing Rousseau), are little more than conspiracies by the rich to plunder the poor. By its very nature, all such government is illegitimate. “New revolutions must,” in Rousseau’s inflammatory words, “dissolve the government altogether or bring it closer to its legitimate institution ... The uprising that ends by strangling or deposing a sultan is as lawful an act as those by which he disposed, the day before, of the lives and goods of his subjects. Force alone maintained him, force alone overthrows him.”⁴⁴

But if Rousseau is right then language — the liberated voice of human reason — is more than just an object in the head. It rests on passions and instincts for agreement and legitimate (ie, collectively agreed) action. Evolution can explain how these instincts evolved, but revolution was needed to liberate their potential. Hunters and gatherers — the ‘noble savages’ of Rousseau’s imagination — are passionate and committed egalitarians. It was they who invented the first words and rules. Language is the historical product not of ‘nature’ considered in the abstract — but of our species’ most

⁴² J-J Rousseau *The social contract and discourses* London 1973, pp179-309. The quotation is on p207.

⁴³ J-J Rousseau, ‘Essay on the origin of languages’, V Gourevitch, (ed) Rousseau: *The discourse and other early political writings* Cambridge 1997, pp247-99. The quotation is on p248.

⁴⁴ J Peck (ed) *The Chomsky reader* London 1988, p142.

ancient, adaptive and *distinctively human* egalitarian institutions and corresponding ideals.

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its origins

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