



Laudation for Noam Chomsky

Lawrence J. Friedman

„Laudation for Noam Chomsky.“ First published in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition - ISBN 1437-1189) 14 / 2010, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2010, pp. 11-16.

Copyright © 2010 and 2011 by Professor Dr. Lawrence J. Friedman, 335 Highland Ave., Somerville, Mass. 02144, USA; E-Mail: ljfriedm[at-symbol]indiana.edu

The summer of 1958, before I left my parent's home to start my freshman year at the University of California, I watched a nationally broadcast program on American television. The very prominent United States newscaster, Mike Wallace, was interviewing Erich Fromm. I was amazed how clear and cogent Fromm was that evening. He spoke of himself as a democratic socialist – no fan of either the American capitalist marketplace or the bureaucratized Soviet alternative. Indeed, he noted how deeply opposed he was to the Cold War contest between these superpowers, how troubled he was by developments in postwar Germany, and how close the world was to nuclear war. He also explained cogently how consumer culture was becoming an increasingly powerful phenomenon globally, and that people were coming to identify themselves not with what they produced but with what they consumed. Who was this very articulate and sensible man, Erich Fromm, I asked my parents. They pointed to a shelf filled with his books and even a few of his articles. I took them to the university with my other belongings that fall and made it a point to study much that he wrote during my undergraduate college years. In that interval, I wrote a regular column in the student newspaper on a diversity of global issues from poverty to authoritarianism to civil liberties and civil rights. Recently, I reread those columns and it was apparent that Fromm's work had done much to shape my positions.

In the years that followed, I completed my undergraduate and graduate schooling. In that interval, I actively engaged in the civil rights

movement and was assigned to duties in the American South. I also worked against the growing American presence in Third World countries. By 1967 I was a History professor but remained a "Frommian". At roughly this point in time, I became attentive to the ventures of another political activist and scholar, Noam Chomsky, and saw a striking affinity between his work and Fromm's. Both evidenced deep moral integrity and uncompromising ethics. They both wrote with absolute clarity and impressive logic. Even on complex and abstract and complex concepts, their texts were rarely obscure. The two of them had flirted with Zionism early in their lives. In a limited sense, Zionism was among the initial factors that politicized both of them. But they changed and even before Israeli statehood, both favored a two state solution to Mideast animosities. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, both had become deeply troubled by Israeli aggressions against its Arab neighbors – largely with the acquiescence of the United States. Fromm was especially persuasive on the matter. I came to share the perspective of both of them on Israel. A conscientious objector who was willing to go to jail rather than serve in the American armed forces in the Viet Nam War, I found another affinity with them. The writings of both helped me to understand how Viet Nam was congruent with a long train of American foreign policy misadventures.

Noam Chomsky was twenty-eight years younger than Erich Fromm. To be sure, he was older than my 1960s generation of New Left American activists, but increasingly a hero to



most of us. Chomsky was a professor who was also a public intellectual and continued to speak to broad and diverse audiences – for human rights, against economic abuses, against militarism, and even against the status quo nature of American higher education. Indeed, a good share of the student protest movement in the United States in the 1960s drew inspiration from Chomsky's insistence that governments, universities, and other institutions tended to impede the right of the individual to think through and respond to his/her problems and conditions.

As I assumed teaching duties at various American universities, I was persuaded by Chomsky's critique of them and of institutions generally plus the elites who ran them. I was particularly taken by his insistence that it was the moral responsibility of educators and intellectuals to speak out against government, university, and corporate repressions. I assigned many of his writings to my students and invited Chomsky to present his thoughts wherever I taught. Although he was a deeply critical thinker with strong perspectives, he insisted that my students formulate their own independent postures on issues that mattered to them. This was part of his larger admonition that a person had to think through and respond to problematic conditions that impacted him/her.

In 2002, when I became Fromm's biographer, I began to compare him with Chomsky. There were important differences, of course, beyond the significant age differential. Fromm had been born in Frankfurt, a commercial hub, at the turn of the century, in an Orthodox Jewish household with emotionally crippling parents. He found relief meeting with older Jewish scholars and studying the Talmud with them. When World War I erupted, Fromm the teenager quickly shed his German nationalism. He saw the horror and futility of war generally – a perspective which never left him. Selecting a vocation came next. His initial instinct was to become a rabbi or an Old Testament scholar. He settled on a doctorate in sociology at the University of Heidelberg with Alfred Weber, who allowed him to write a less than conventional dissertation on Jewish law in maintaining social cohesion within three Diaspora communities. At the time, he also maintained daily and highly

personal exchanges with Salman Rabinkow, a scholar of the Talmud, personally warm and captivating, and an eclectic socialist. Their direct one and one sessions that combined intense and open exchanges of emotion with Old Testament ethics later guided Fromm's approach as a clinician. Fromm had a problematic training analysis in Munich. He had a slightly better one at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute where he had important contacts with Otto Fenichel's group of Marxian Freudians. In the late 1920s Max Horkheimer hired Fromm to merge his psychoanalytic perspective with social science research at the Frankfurt Institute. He began his tenure there by directing a monumental study of authoritarian propensities in a number of German workers. The danger of rising European fascism was therefore on his mind before Hitler rose to power and he helped relocate the Institute at Columbia University in the mid-1930s. The rest of his family became emigres or were killed in the Holocaust, which was essential background to his 1941 classic, *Escape from Freedom*. In the early Cold War period, Fromm came to be sought out as a specialist in German politics. Although Fromm lived in the United States and Mexico for long periods of time after his emigration from Germany and considered himself a citizen of the world, one can make a compelling case that he remained culturally and intellectually a European. Indeed, he moved from Mexico to Locarno to spend his last years.

Chomsky, by contrast, had decided American roots and had a different generational experience. He was born in a small Jewish ghetto in Philadelphia that was largely surrounded by Catholics with anti-semitic proclivities. His parents' first language was Yiddish but they brought him up using Hebrew language and literature. Yet his upbringing was far more secular than Fromm's had been. He was not born to see the tragedy of World War I. Like Fromm, he watched the Europeans turn to authoritarianism in the 1930a – but from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Yet it is well to note that as a ten year old in a happier and less conflicted family than Fromm's, he wrote a paper on the ascendance of fascism in the Spanish Civil War.

With the exception of a couple of years in the early 1920s as a Zionist, Fromm did not be-



come a political activist until well into adulthood. Chomsky had turned to politics earlier in his life. He heavily identified as a young teenager with urban based anarchist politics. Chomsky enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania in 1945 where he concentrated his studies on philosophy and linguistics under Zelig Harris. An admirer of Fromm's writings, especially *Escape from Freedom*, Harris guided Chomsky politically and was critical of all but the most radical variations of Zionism. Chomsky wrote a Masters thesis on the morphophonemic rules in modern Hebrew, but his focus was not on Old Testament ethical doctrine nor other phases of Jewish tradition. Indeed, when Chomsky finished his doctoral work at Pennsylvania in linguistics in 1955, his focus remained far more technical and far less social and psychological than Fromm's had been at that point in his life. Chomsky's dissertation concentrated on syntactic structures, a topic very different from Fromm's dissertation on three Diaspora Jewish collectivities. Yet at this stage in the careers of both, the clarity and precision of their writing had already become evident.

Chomsky went on to become a Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguistics professor and that became a professional base of sorts even as he was exceedingly critical of the status quo nature of universities. Fromm in contrast had elected to do most of his work outside of the academy. He made a living from clinical work and book royalties and not from a university salary. Whereas Fromm's education and training had been entirely in Germany, all of Chomsky's had been in America. Unlike Fromm, he was concerned with deep structures and not social psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, or religion.

Fromm was decidedly the more spiritual of the two. One of his specialty areas was the emotional aspects of religious experience. He studied the ethical and psychological underpinnings behind Judaism and the Old Testament. He was also interested in how Zen Buddhism had the potential to calm the human psyche and came to meditate daily. Whereas Freud and his followers were quick to dismiss religious experiences, Fromm took them very seriously. Indeed, Fromm brought this spirituality into his clinical

approach, seeing effective psychotherapy as a serious, feeling, and spontaneous exchange of thought and feeling between two people. It was not unlike his early exchanges with Rabinkow. While Chomsky has always underscored human rights and dignities of humans as rational beings who suffered from institutional repressions, he has not emphasized the spiritual and religious side of our existence to anywhere the degree that Fromm had. Yet he has displayed absolute moral integrity and a transparent sense of ethics.

Another difference between the two concerns their focus on human nature. The qualities of man as an individual within the context of his surrounding society had always been a primary focus for Fromm. In 1968, for example, he put together an anthology, *The Nature of Man*, housing excerpts on the essence of human nature from Heraclitus to Sartre and Riesman. Fromm's core units of study – social character, authoritarianism, biophilia and necrophilia, love and destructiveness – are each essentially summations of the totality of a human being. Whereas Chomsky has assuredly spoken to issues of human nature in the context, for example, of generative grammar, semantics, and more generally the nature of language that we all share, he has not equated them with the totality of the human being. In this sense, he has been more specific than Fromm had been.

If one peruses a bibliography of all of Chomsky's writings, one will note that he has focused overwhelmingly and for many decades not so much on linguistics but on the hot issues of global combat and exploitation. Assuredly, Fromm wrote a considerable amount on global conflicts and trouble spots, but not as extensively as Chomsky. When it came to topics like the arms race and nuclear weapons proliferation, the problematic conduct of Soviet and especially American foreign policy in the course of the Cold War, and the repressions and abuses and lies of unethical regimes in a plethora of countries, both wrote and lectured abundantly and from deeply ethical perspectives. Yet Chomsky's output on this count has been and continues to be truly remarkable.

I am not invoking these differences between the two men to even remotely suggest that Chomsky is not deserving of the honor he is re-



ceiving today. What I am saying is that if they were both together today, they would cherish their differences as well as their affinities. Both enjoyed exchanges with people with different perspectives than their own and different informational sources so that each might enrich his sources of knowledge and understanding. Fromm maintained a remarkable correspondence with Moshe Kaplan, a New York Postal worker with different politics than his own who studied ancient Jewish texts. He kept a long letter exchange with Sarah Wittes, a young graduate student who was studying Rousseau and had a different take on French history than his own. The Fromm archive is filled with such interchanges between very different people who enjoyed learning from and otherwise helping the other.

Chomsky has lectured publicly far more than Fromm had and seems to have corresponded somewhat less. But his eyes light up and a smile comes to his face when a member of his audience, especially a student, politely disagrees with him. A few decades ago, I invited him to give the annual peace lecture at a university in Ohio where I was teaching. In an interchange with a young eighteen year old first year student, she asked him about an argument he had advanced concerning Israeli-Arab relationships. “What matters is not what I think,” Chomsky replied, but the kind of evidence and logic she used to sustain her perspective. On no few occasions, I have seen him behave in this way during public presentations. It has come to be a conspicuous part of his response to questions and the mark of an excellent teacher. It has also been part of his general philosophy on the necessity for the individual to have the opportunity to reason through and respond to the conditions around one.

Similarities between Chomsky and Fromm are much more striking, making Chomsky a perfect recipient for the Fromm prize. For one, Chomsky has read and admired a good many of Fromm’s books ever since Harris, his mentor, recommended *Escape from Freedom* (1941). He has liked Fromm’s questioning of established wisdom and Fromm’s dissident, irreverent style. *Escape from Freedom* was of course a classic on authoritarianism, and one can see why it decid-

edly impacted Chomsky. Although authoritarianism had many aspects, Fromm saw it heavily rooted in sado-masochism. Of course, authoritarianism was antithetical to Chomsky’s disposition toward individual freedom and dignity. He has had a lifelong suspicion of the authoritarian potential of any government. Congruent with Fromm, he has considered authoritarian regimes to be at odds with the need of the individual for free deployment of his reason and full mustering of his feelings. For Chomsky, communities, governments, and other institutions had to be entirely answerable to the individual and the citizenry-at-large. They were to sustain individual development and not to impair it. When governments failed on these counts, they lost their legitimacy. Indeed, Chomsky has been even more suspicious than Fromm had been that governments of any sort could do anything much for individual development. Like Fromm, Chomsky has never restricted his criticism to a single country or part of the world. He has championed the rights and dignities of citizens everywhere.

In John Cuddihy’s remarkable 1974 volume *The Ordeal of Civility*, no few Jewish intellectuals (whether “believers” or not) were cast as historically marginalized – outside the traditional Jewish enclave or ghetto yet excluded from the Christian dominated professional world. In response, the thought and action of some Jewish intellectuals has been oppositional not only to Christian domination postures and discriminatory ideologies but to many of the elite brokers of power. For Cuddihy, Freud challenged super-ego (i.e. Gentile) constraints on the id (i.e. “Yid” – the Jew), for example, while Marx attacked capitalist domination of the proletariat. A good case can be made that Fromm and Chomsky have fit into this critical role, always suspicious of dominant ideologies and the deeper motives of elites and their institutions. Fromm was, of course schooled in Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism. He was in an oppositional, outsider role in most realms of his activity. He broke from the Frankfurt Institute, from orthodox Freudianism, from established religious institutions, from corporate power, from American capitalism, from what he called Soviet bureaucracy driven “statism”, and from any other insti-



tutional arrangements that did not comport with a deep, ethically driven “humanism”. Perhaps even more than Fromm, Chomsky has attacked established institutions and ideologies, especially those advanced by American power elites in a quest to assert United States hegemony throughout the world. Like Fromm, he has attacked unlawful, authoritarian and oppressive regimes wherever they appeared. But whereas Fromm propounded direct democracy and “humanist” community life, Chomsky (while close to Fromm in his visions of humanism and direct democracy), has been willing to focus somewhat more than Fromm on exposing specific exploitive practices perpetrated by particular elites in a large number of places.

Fromm regularly attacked consumerism – the forging of a sense of self by acquiring goods and services. The alternative of what he called a “to have” social psychology was “to be” – to act congruent with what was in the self that promoted joy and happiness and creativity. Fromm argued for the latter against the former in much of his work. *To Have Or to Be?* (1976), his last book, made the strongest case for this perspective. Chomsky has found much favor with Fromm’s posture on consumerism. He especially liked Fromm’s *The Sane Society* (1955), which made a compelling case against consumerism and the “to have” mentality. But Chomsky has been especially critical of distortive information by a media that has sought to “manufacture consent” or acquiescence, through their control of information, in the unethical actions of establishment elites, institutions, and especially governments. Chomsky characterized this as a form of rigged consumption of select information that made it difficult for people first to understand and then to demand remedy for the actions of the brokers of power. Chomsky asserted that such a constriction of a full range of information was antithetical to democracy. Fromm (while spending less time on information control than Chomsky) very firmly agreed. In his abhorrence of consumerism, Fromm addressed ways that people absorbed distortive propaganda that posed as objective fact.

If Chomsky wrote more than Fromm on public affairs, political and economic, one should not discount the very considerable

amount Fromm wrote and published in this area. Of the two, Chomsky wrote and spoke about exploitations and public wrong doings in a more biting, directly sarcastic, and (quite justifiably) angry way. Coming from a European scholarly background where decorum rather than bluntness was pervasive, Fromm tended to deploy more restrained language (which sometimes “candy coated” his great anger). Perhaps as a result, he was often able to publish letters and columns in the *New York Times* while Chomsky was excluded. The somewhat more muted European intellectual manner sometimes combined with Fromm’s substantial campaign donations to prominent progressive American politicians like William Fulbright, Adlai Stevenson, and Eugene McCarthy. As a result, Fromm (unlike Chomsky) got at least a modicum of access to the more “sane” progressive office holders in the United States government. Although Chomsky agreed with almost all the positions Fromm advanced to these brokers of power, he drew greater comfort in an outsider and gadfly role. Fromm was very pleased with Chomsky’s gadfly role and sometimes invoked it himself.

Two public controversies illustrate this essential accord in the public realm between Chomsky and Fromm. There were instances where they directly corresponded. One involved Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author, historian, novelist, and dramatist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. In 1973 the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* was published – a detailed account of the network of Russian prisons and labor camps in the Stalin period. That plus the second volume sold massively in the West. Exiled from the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn moved to the United States in the mid-1970s. He warned of the dangers of Communist aggression globally and the “weakening” of Western moral fiber (the American military failure in the Viet Nam war being one such example). He was very popular, especially among American Cold War conservatives. Fromm launched a campaign to expose Solzhenitsyn for propagating a dangerous line that could not only accelerate Cold War tensions but move the world closer to nuclear war. He tried to enlist the support of Senator Fulbright, prominent sociologist David Riesman, and no few other pro-



gressives. Noam Chomsky was among those to whom he wrote. He underscored to Chomsky how Solzhenitsyn was a crazy fanatic and reactionary Slavic nationalist who was exercising a dangerous effect on public opinion. And Fromm urged Chomsky to write a letter or column in the *New York Times* exposing Solzhenitsyn. Chomsky wrote back promptly and warmly, telling Fromm that in his public presentations he had characterized Solzhenitsyn precisely as Fromm had. The man was no moral giant but “a moral imbecile” who had contempt for democracy. Chomsky told Fromm he had not been successful in getting published in the *New York Times* but would try to in other venues to expose Solzhenitsyn. He urged Fromm to stay in touch and provided his summer address. Fromm wrote back to Chomsky, underscoring how remarkable it was that they agreed so precisely not only on Solzhenitsyn but on so much else in public affairs. Fromm told Chomsky of others who shared their perspective and essentially welcomed him to this collectivity. Chomsky replied that he would be delighted to cooperate with Fromm and his colleagues not only on the Solzhenitsyn matter but a whole host of others. He noted in passing, for example, the similarities of their case against the crude behaviorism of B.F. Skinner. A firm framework of exchange between Fromm and Chomsky had been established predicated on the commonality of their perspectives.

The Israel-Arab conflict in the Middle East exemplifies an area in public affairs comparable to the Solzhenitsyn controversy where Fromm and Chomsky shared almost identical perspectives. Beginning in the late 1940s but especially by the 1970s both felt that Israel had become an aggressive and bellicose nation and an outpost for American interests in the Middle East. Both

insisted that it was very important to distinguish such a Jewish state from historic Jewish humanistic traditions. Both felt that part of the problem was that Israel as a state was in dialogue with what the Nazis had done to world Jewry – that the Israeli elite were determined to resist any group which purportedly threatened their state’s existence. Like Fromm, Chomsky had long called for an Israeli/Arab two state solution to territorial conflict and they exchanged letters on the matter. Fromm had access to his friend William Fulbright and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in making his case while Chomsky did not. But he spoke to Fulbright and others in power very favorably of Chomsky’s critical perspective toward Israel and spoke well of Chomsky’s outsider gadfly role. Once again Fromm and Chomsky not only shared perspectives on a public controversy but communicated and sought to help each other.

I could go on at considerably greater length underscoring the affinity between Fromm and Chomsky on issues before Fromm’s death thirty years ago as well as the creative disparities between them. They were and are of essentially the same “cloth” intellectually, politically, and ethically. The problems they both faced were multiple – consumerism, authoritarianism, the rights and dignities of the individual, the problematic nature of American and Israeli foreign policies, and the import of democracy. Is Chomsky a twenty-first century Fromm, having to fight the same battles both partook in decades ago? With exceptions and qualifications, I think so, assuredly explaining why Noam Chomsky is so appropriate a recipient for the 2010 Erich Fromm Prize.