
Book Review

Noam Chomsky and his machine-man

by Richard Schulman

Rules and Regulations

Noam Chomsky

New York: Columbia University Press, 1980

\$17.50; 299 pp.

Once upon a time in the little effluvial duchy of Cambridge-on-the-Charles a controversy broke out among the court fools. One faction of these insisted that man was a machine born utterly empty, which learned to coordinate its clankety-clank by being administered sweetmeats when its random motions took a direction desired by the duchy's administrators; these were called Behaviorists. An opposing faction argued that man could never have become such a complex machine had it not been largely Pre-Programmed at birth; these were the Degenerative Linguisticians.

In recent decades many books have been brought out by the leader of the Pre-Programmed group, Gnome Chomsky. One of these, *Rules and Representations*, was written for a non-specialized academic audience and thus affords the reader an opportunity to survey Chomsky's epistemology without having to suffer an MIT degree-program in linguistics. Although largely a "re-tread" of views presented in previous works, *Rules* has at least done the reader the service of accurately identifying Chomsky's forebears: Descartes and the Cambridge Platonists.

Were Chomsky to add to this lineage the *l'homme-machine* writers of the French Enlightenment, who themselves derive from Descartes, the lineage would be complete. It is with these writers that Chomsky shares the view, permeating and unifying all his writings on language, mind, and politics, that man is a natively pre-programmed Jacobin machine.

Rules and Representations is based on lectures Chomsky delivered at Columbia University. To give the contents the appearance of not merely being stale vapors from an aging professor's trousers, one section crepitates against the Ordinary Language philosophers, Chom-

sky's current straw men, or in this case, Straw-sons.

Two and a half decades earlier, Chomsky, in a review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, boosted himself to academic fame at the easily-won expense of the Harvard pigeon trainer. Yet, as MIT professor Chomsky's recent work underlines, the two Cambridge academics, once secondary differences are lain aside, agree in the same underlying view of man as a creature of inherently fixed capacities. Both regard creativity—man's essence as human—as unknowable, a mystery, a random mutation. Thus Chomsky in the book under review writes that "The study of grammar raises problems that we have some hope of solving; the creative use of language is a mystery that eludes our intellectual grasp" (p. 222). Similar irrationalist outbursts on the subject of human creativity permeate Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

To Skinner's operant-conditioning-based environmental determinism, Chomsky, the imputed anti-behaviorist, opposes a genetic determinism parallel to the reductionism of the Konrad Lorenz school of animal-behaviorists. In consequence the two supposed rivals are espousing mere variants of a shared underlying epistemology of zero mental growth. In Chomsky's paradigm, man is a pre-programmed talking computer; in Skinner's, a Big-Brother-programmed talking pigeon.

Enlightenment origins

Both Chomsky and Skinner are scions of an epistemological hoax launched in the 17th century by oligarchical circles determined to crush the Renaissance scientific faction that began with Dante Alighieri and continued through Nicholas of Cusa, Bruno, Stevin, and Leibniz. This Renaissance scientific faction regarded individual human creative mentation and the ongoing development of the universe as one consubstantial Being. To create suitable political conditions for such an identity being developed in the typically bestialized subject of Renaissance Europe, these thinkers sought to foster widely and deeply cultured republican nation-states, based upon consciously enriched national spoken languages. Such was the standpoint of Dante's *De Vulgare Eloquentia* and Leibniz's 1697 essay *On the Improvement of the German Language*.

Against this scientific faction and in defense of its own evil interests, the principal families of Europe's oligarchy launched a project that came to be known by the intentionally deceptive name of the Enlightenment.

Descartes is properly regarded as the founder of this Enlightenment tendency, which emphasized a gnostic dualism between mind and nature—and emphasized formalism in scientific proof. Quickly following in Descartes' footsteps were Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, and the French materialists. There were heated quarrels on secondary matters but an otherwise fundamental agree-

ment in opposition to the notion of human creative activity as the continued unfolding of God's will throughout the universe.

Chomsky portrays himself as a modern-day continuator of "Cartesian linguistics." His patrons and cothinkers are similarly aware of Chomsky's identity as such a continuator. Thus the Aristotelian *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, under its entry for "Cartesianism," hails Chomsky as the leading modern Cartesian, noting: "Because both the principles [of language] and the capacity to use them can be said to be innate ideas, the mind might then be compared to a preprogrammed computer with creative capacities—a view that presents in contemporary form the old Cartesian questions: how can machines think?"

Such is precisely the concern of Chomsky's MIT colleague Marvin Minsky, and the implied epistemology of MIT Systems theory guru, Jay Forrester, co-author of the notorious and discredited Malthusian tract, *Limits to Growth*. Indeed, there is evidence that Chomsky's theory of language and mind is a kind of *self-fulfilling* evil theory, by being used to "program" individuals, either as terrorists under brainwashing conditions or ordinary schoolchildren through such computer-assisted instructional programs as Control Data Corporation's "PLATO." That Chomsky himself is by no means naïve about these considerations is underlined by his own well-documented political anarchism and support of international terrorists.

Chomsky insists repeatedly throughout *Rules* that his intention in the book, and its predecessors, is to make a definite statement about mind, the importance of innate ideas, and the severe limitations that innate ideas impose on any possible human knowledge and self-knowledge. He falsely but lawfully claims that language learning is complete by adolescence, with "only marginal further change" after this—a statement true, doubtless, of "Clockwork Orange" hoods with their transistor-radio cultures and the masses of citizens who never rise far above a similar fate, but hardly a true statement of the human being who enjoys continuous adulthood intellectual development.

In a similar vein is Chomsky's false, pre-pubescent assertion that a child learns language with virtually no input from adults, and his otherwise inexplicable attacks on those who would emphasize language's function as a means of communication (p. 210, p. 230) and on those who concern themselves with language's first origins. In the one case, the pre-pubescent Chomsky is irritated with language's social aspects, so inimical to the autoerotic infantile ego; in the other, he is irritated with the obvious fact that language had to be invented as some point—by an adult, and then further developed by other adults. Like primitive man or a child or Alexander Pope, his view of language is magical; it is a mere

rearrangement of existing word-tokens using an essentially fixed set of rules. Poetry is regarded as too complex to be dealt with by linguistics at present, whereas in fact, at the hands of a genius, it epitomizes the essence of language itself.

Similarly pre-adolescent is Chomsky's delusion that formal studies in syntax, and studies which base themselves on notions of sentence-grammaticality in particular, say anything significant about Mind. It is as though the Aristotelian Cauchy, who translated Leibniz's discovery of the calculus into a formalist's axiomatization, were to have paraded himself about as the first to understand the calculus. Were Chomsky to have confined himself to doing work on the delimited but by no means useless subject of the syntactic rules of specific human languages, and those rules apparently common to all known human languages, without meddling in psychology, he might have done better.

It is the genius of human language that it has the plasticity, of which the greatest poetry is a concentrated but by no means exclusive expression, to capture, through ambiguity and deliberate extensions of lexicon and syntax new conceptions necessary to the advancement of mankind to higher states of knowledge and material culture.

EIR founder Lyndon H. LaRouche has developed a conception which, although introduced in a different context, has a relevance to the point at hand. Although the visual apparatus human beings are born with is appropriate to a three-dimensional space, whereas the physical universe itself is of a higher dimensionality and topology, there is a projective correspondence between human visual space and the higher-order space of the universe-in-development. So too we may say that language, with its finite, though not fixed, syntactical rules and vocabulary is "projectively" appropriate to mapping the transfinite qualities of Mind.

The starting premise of an actual science of human language is to be found in those who understand the highest uses and extensions of language: the Dante of *The Divine Comedy* and *De Vulgare Eloquentia*; Milton, who bent, hammered, and reformed the English tongue that it might mirror his enormous mind; Leibniz, who established the foundations of the German nation in his 1697 essay "On the Improvement of the German Language;" Shelley, whose "Defence of Poetry" describes, as from inside the mind, the struggle to extend language to name and capture fragile but essential conception.

The study of syntactic phenomena may be expected to have the uses and limits that grammarians' studies have had in the past, when competent. But if researchers in this field tolerate as their spokesman a pretentious fool and terrorist controller, with a fascistic view of mind as a genetically pre-programmed box, the field will deserve all the contempt it gets.