

From Aristotle to Adam Smith: What is Left and What is Right?

An Interview with Noam Chomsky

by Pierre Guerlain

*Noam Chomsky is mostly well-known for his groundbreaking work in linguistics and his political analyses. Chomsky revolutionized the field of linguistics (see his *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, New York, Plenum, 1975 (1955-56)) and became a prominent intellectual and activist in the 1960s when he opposed the war in Vietnam and was put on Nixon's "enemy list." He is a severe critic of academics and intellectual fashions (see *American Power and the New Mandarins*, New York, Pantheon, 1969) and is often critical of all the groups or individuals involved in a conflict. Thus he may have sharp words for the left, the right, liberals and conservatives or Americans, Israelis and Palestinians. In the 1960s he criticized the student activists who were also opposed to the war in Vietnam. His views have often earned him enemies and he has become involved in several political or intellectual controversies. He defines himself as a responsible intellectual and a left libertarian. He has published extensively in the fields of foreign policy (*World Orders Old and New*, New York, Columbia UP, 1994) or media studies (*Necessary Illusions*, Boston South End, 1989, and, with Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York, Pantheon, 1988). His views on clarity and his belief in the "good society" make him an heir of the Enlightenment. Robert Barsky's biography: *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1997) is an excellent introduction to his work and political thinking. The following interview deals only with the political aspect of his intellectual life.*



Before we talk about the American left, could you explain how you became politically involved, and say a few words about the relationship between your work in linguistics and your political activities? Or maybe your scientific choices or your preferences as a citizen?

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Well, I became involved as a young child. I grew up in the Depression, and I was always politically involved, ever since childhood, with one thing and another. So the only question was what forms it took. When the ferment of the '60s was beginning, there was a range of opportunities for political involvement that had not existed in the 1950s, a very quiet and disappointing period.

Were you quiet and disciplined yourself in the '50s?

Not really, though opportunities were limited. I was in a military laboratory, the Research Laboratory of Electronics, and I was the first person, I suppose, who refused to get clearance, just as a protest. They didn't care much. Anything that was going on, any kind of activities or protests, I was often part of. But there was very little. In fact, I wasn't even sure I was going to stay in the country. I was thinking at the time of going to live in a Kibbutz in Israel. I had contacts there and had spent some time there, and I might well have left. I had no particular commitments to the academic world, so it was a period of flux anyway for me. Things got settled down here, we started having a family, and then the 1960s activities began, the Civil Rights movement, protest against the war, lots of other things. A range of options developed, which I did become involved in, but I was more or less picking up interests and activities from childhood.

Do you find there's a relationship between what you do in linguistics and your political activities?

I could just as well be an algebraic topologist. Of course there are some connections, though, if you look closely enough at this... If you go back to the Enlightenment, roughly around that period, there was a connection drawn between a kind of theory of freedom and theories of mind and language. You find it in Rousseau and Humboldt and others, in the early days of classical liberalism, and of more radical versions of Enlightenment thought, and it developed somewhat later. I think at some abstract level you can make certain connections of that type. But they go way beyond anything that's understood. We're talking about core factors of human nature which might lie at the origins of society and social struggle,

and might also lie at the origins of our cognitive nature, but now we're going well beyond what science could tell you. And those connections, if real, are pretty abstract. I don't draw them myself. If people ask me about them, I'll talk about them.

Well actually I have a question about the left in academia as well. You mentioned the Enlightenment, and as you know, a lot of people, so-called postmodernists, dispute the idea that the Enlightenment was in fact a step towards progress. How do you position yourself in this debate?

In the debate with the postmodernists I don't position myself at all, partly because about 90 per cent of what they're saying seems to me unintelligible, so I have no way of positioning myself with regard to it. And much of the other ten per cent seems to me either obvious or else false, so I don't position myself.

In one of your books you talk about the "latest Paris lunacies." Do you have specific writers in mind? What is it you object to, style or content?

It's the kind of style that eviscerates content. There's a sort of play, which I don't find amusing, and when I try to detect the content, it seems to me extremely scanty and uninteresting.

Are you talking about people like Derrida, Baudrillard?

Yes, and Lacan and Kristeva and others. I don't talk about them. The reason I don't talk about them is I don't know their work very well. The reason I don't know their work very well is that when I try to read it, I get very little out of it. First of all, it seems to me extremely over-inflated. I mean, anything that I can understand, it seems to me, could be put quite simply. When I get to the parts that are put quite simply they seem to me not very interesting. So for example, I don't have to be told that foundationalism is dead. That was known in the seventeenth century, and I'm not impressed when somebody rediscovers it and puts it in hugely inflated and pompous rhetoric when it was understood 300 years ago and they said it simply. It would be hard to find a foundationalist since the seventeenth century, including even the Vienna circle. So, critiques of foundationalism don't seem particularly interesting. To say that conceptions of truth are relative to our cultural background, and so on, I mean, I knew that when I was a child, and I don't have to be told it in a very elaborate and flowery prose with irrelevant references to show how literary you are and so on. These are just games of intellectuals, and I'm not interested.

I have more questions about this, but I want to start asking questions about the left. Some people say the American left is dead. Do you think the reports of its death are greatly exaggerated, and in what way does the left in America differ from the European left?

It's always been different. The countries are very different. The United States has always been very disorganized. It's never had left political parties to bring people together. The labor movement, while very active and lively, is not like the European labor movement. For example, in Paris you can have a general strike, in the United States you can't have a general strike. That's because the labor movement is scattered and segregated internally even by law. The United States is very much a business-run society, much more so than any other, and the legal system is designed so that class solidarity is inexpressible. So, actions like general strikes and secondary boycotts and so on are in fact illegal. But it shows up in the society in all kinds of ways, and the same is true of the left, the dissident—I don't use the term "left" much, I'm not sure what it means—but the critical or dissident popular movements, whether they're involved with the environment, women's rights, minority rights, aggression, human rights, economic oppression, or whatever, there's a whole range of them. I think they go far beyond anything in Europe, but they're very scattered and separated, so they're not organized. But they're certainly not dead, they're much more lively than they were in the '60s, much more lively.

Why don't you use the word 'left' any more?

I rarely used it before either. The terms of political discourse have been so corrupted by intellectuals that they're almost useless. For example, people talk about Marxism-Leninism as the left. In my view, Marxism-Leninism is on the extreme right. I don't feel like arguing about terminology so I just don't use the word. It was a system designed, pretty much as Lenin said, to destroy every socialist institution. That was its main purpose, he made it very clear, and to subordinate the mass of the population, to a vanguard leadership, which would drive them to some form of industrialization and modernization. In my view, that's the extreme right.

So you would characterize yourself more as a dissident than a man of the left?

I relate myself to the traditional libertarian left, but that's one tendency within what's called the left. There are other tendencies within the left that I consider far right. And certainly there are tendencies that are

considered right that I consider left. Take, say, classical liberalism. If you read Adam Smith, I'm not talking about the illusions that are concocted about him but the actual text, there are many things that I would consider typical left-wing thought. So for example, Adam Smith does give an argument for the market, but his argument for the market is based on the assumption that under conditions of perfect liberty, which he hopes will be attained, the market would lead to perfect equality. In fact he regarded equality of outcome, not equality of opportunity, as being an obvious desideratum for a decent society. That's a left-wing idea. Or Aristotle. Let's take Aristotle, the founder of modern political thought. Is he on the left or is he on the right? Aristotle discusses the different kinds of social order, oligarchy, tyranny and democracy. Among the three, he prefers democracy, but he also mentions flaws in democracy, and the flaws are interesting. The major flaws have to do with inequality. So, if you have a concentration of wealth within a democracy, then first, most of the population will not be able to participate freely, because they don't have the opportunities. And even if they were to participate, they would use their force, their numerical force, to pursue their own interests, not the common good of all, and their own interests would be opposed to the interests of the minority of the wealthy. Well, for him democracy ought to be free, participatory, a community of free men participating equally, trying to find the common good. So a democracy wracked by extreme inequality would have serious flaws. He saw a conflict between democracy, on the one hand, and inequality and poverty, on the other. His conclusion was: let's eliminate poverty. So, for Aristotle, democracy has to be what we would call a welfare state. It has to guarantee "lasting prosperity to the poor" by distribution of "public revenues," a welfare state in other words. And then he goes on to describe means of doing this. He says that the best, the only properly functioning democracy, will be when everybody has "moderate and sufficient property." Property is a broad term. Well, is he on the left or is he on the right? He's taking a position which in contemporary terms would be called left-wing social democracy. He doesn't talk much about organization of work, he's obviously not talking about the industrial system and so on and so forth, but in the spectrum, he'd be way off on the left. On the other hand, there are conflicting factors. By "community of free men," he meant first of all men not women, and secondly he meant not slaves, and thirdly not aliens, so that cuts out a considerable part of the species. It's a little hard to blame Aristotle for this; these questions were not addressed until very recent years in fact. Nevertheless, there is Aristotle.

Now let's take a look at the foundations of American democracy, the freest country in the world, I think, the place to look if you want to look at stable democratic institutions.

You are a severe critic of the US but you also say it's the freest country in the world. For a lot of people in Europe it's an apparent contradiction, so can you...?

It can be the freest country in the world and still have plenty of things wrong with it. The freedom is of a special kind. There can't be a capitalist society, it couldn't survive for five minutes, but countries do vary on the spectrum of more or less capitalist, and the US is towards the capitalist end of the spectrum. And the more you go towards a capitalist system the more everything becomes a commodity. In principle, commodities are available, and you can have as much as you can buy. Take shoes—in principle they are available, and you can have as many as you can buy. If you have no money you go without shoes; if you have a lot of money, you may have a thousand shoes. That's the capitalist system. The same principle extends to freedom. In principle there's a lot available, more than any other country that I know. On the other hand, you get as much as you can buy... I can buy a lot, but a poor person... You can walk down the street where people are begging for money so they can make it through the night; they can't buy much freedom. So in principle, it's available, maybe more so than anywhere. In practice it's not often available. It's not a contradiction. That's a description of the complexities of existence, and if people see that as a contradiction they're not thinking clearly. So, the United States is the freest country in the world in the sense that rights are guaranteed. The State, for example, has the most limited authority to coerce of any country I know, any major country at least, and that's freedom. Freedom of speech, the United States is one of the few countries where freedom of speech is even regarded as a value to be preserved. In France, the concept's not even understood, but in the United States, yes, it's understood. On the other hand, going back to your left/right story, let's go back to Aristotle and take a look at the founding of this country which, certainly in the 18th century was a major step forward in the development of human freedom. So, consider the American Constitution. If you look at the American constitutional debates, you discover that James Madison, who was the framer, faced exactly the same dilemma as Aristotle, almost in the same words. He said yes, we want a democracy, but if there's going to be inequality, the mass of poor people will use their voting power to attack the wealth of the rich. They will carry out what we would call agrarian reforms—it was an agrarian society—so they will try to take the property of the rich and have it for themselves. And he said that's wrong, just as Aristotle thought it was wrong. They faced the same dilemma but drew opposite conclusions. Aristotle's conclusion was, "Okay, let's eliminate poverty." Madison's was, "Let's eliminate democracy." Quite clearly, he said the goal of government must be "to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority."

The “great beast”?

The “great beast.” Hamilton’s “great beast.” We must “protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” and we can do that by ensuring that power is in the hands of “the wealth of the nation,” the people who will be sympathetic to property. He foresaw that there would be a vast expansion of those who “labor under all the hardships of life and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings.” These people have to be marginalized.

Well, who’s left and who’s right, Aristotle or Madison? I don’t find these terms useful. It seems to me what we should do is look at what they said. Madison was certainly more libertarian than Aristotle on many issues. On the other hand, on some fundamental issues, I would say that Aristotle is way to the left of Madison, and probably to the left of virtually anyone you can think of in the political spectrum today. These are very strange concepts; I don’t think they mean much. If by the left you mean people who are fighting for more justice, more freedom, and more rights, control by people of their own destinies and so on, okay then I can identify the left. But then a lot of people who are called libertarian are not on the left. For example in the United States and England—and now with US influence, the term is spreading around the world—there’s a concept of libertarianism that is completely opposed to the traditional concept. Traditionally the libertarian strand in political thought was left libertarian, socialist libertarian, in other words, anarchist. The United States was different. Here libertarian meant ultra-right, individualist anarchism. In my view that’s not libertarian, because what they’re saying is the State should have a very limited role, but private tyrannies can have a massive role. There are to be few constraints on private, unaccountable tyrannies. Corporations, which are close to totalitarian in their internal social structure, are supposed to have phenomenal rights... For example, they have the right of free speech, like advertising. It would horrify any classical liberal to say that a “collectivist legal institution”—to use the technical term of legal historians—an organic entity of the type favored in neo-Hegelian doctrine should have the rights of persons, say of speech as libertarians demand. So it seems to me that the difference between those that call themselves libertarians and the totalitarians is often rather slight. Again you have to look at the ideas and their meaning, not just give them labels.

I have a question about Marxism. You said that you thought Leninists were rightists. Very often your critics accuse you of being a Marxist, although in your books this is not what you say, and there was a controversy, which I don’t know much about: Living Marxism and your alleged support for this Marxist perspective. Can you explain this perception?

Living Marxism is a journal of the 1930s, when I was a child. It was the voice of people like Anton Pannekoek and Karl Korsch, Paul Mattick and

others who considered themselves Marxist, but were very anti-Bolshevik. The *Living Marxism* tendency, happens to be very close to anarcho-syndicalism for example. Daniel Guérin is one of the people who have written about that. I have too. I was interested in it and found a lot of good things in it. This was a kind of libertarian Marxism, rather close to anarchism. When people criticize it, I doubt if they know what they're talking about. They probably see the word "Marxism" and they think Stalinism. I'm not impressed with the level of discussion that goes on in France or...

This is a controversy I heard about in the US...

Have you ever heard of *Living Marxism*?

Todd Gitlin told me about this... something about you being apparently in favor of the Serbs...

When did I say that? Did you find it?

I didn't...

There's an awful lot of gossip that goes on among the academic left, and I have no particular interest in it, any more than in the gossip that goes on among the academic right. If you look, you may find that I have said something in favor of Serbs, like I think their human rights ought to be respected. For example, I don't think that Croatians ought to massacre Serbs. Okay, I just said something in favor of the Serbs. Now I'm sure that some fanatic commissar can take that and say that I'm in favor of Milosevic. That's the way it begins. But I'm not interested in that, so I don't involve myself with intellectuals because they're much too dishonest, and I don't want to have anything to do...

I said that you're accused of being...

But referring to my "support" for *Living Marxism* is very interesting. This is a journal the last issue of which, I think, appeared in 1939. It was a journal of the anti-Bolshevik left. And, yes, I did read it with interest when I was a teenager, a few years later. I also met Mattick and respected his work in general, and the work of serious people in the anti-Bolshevik left like Anton Pannekoek who wrote an important study of workers councils, among many other things, including very sharp criticism of Lenin. I also "supported" their support for the Spanish anarchists. Now, somebody can hear the word "Marxism" and start spinning associations and draw conclusions about the Gulag, but that's their problem, not mine. As to the

connection between *Living Marxism* and the Serbs—that is too absurd to discuss.

Well, now I have a question about globalization. It seems to be a kind of buzzword. How do you see it affecting the Third World, Europe, and the US, and is it something that should be resisted in all its forms? And is it the equivalent of Americanization?

Well, first of all, we have to be clear about what's happening. If we define globalization by such measures as let's say, the ratio of trade to the size of the economy, investment flows relative to the global economy, and so on, if we look at those measures, which are plausible measures of globalization, the story is that there was a very high level of globalization early in this century, under British domination, with the gold standard. In-between the two wars, it declined quite radically. Since the Second World War it's been picking up again, and it's now more or less like it was before World War I. So the level of globalization today, by general measures, is not unlike what it was before the First World War. But that's by general measures. If you look more closely, you find that the speed and the scale of financial flows has increased enormously in the last 25 years. This is largely a destructive part of the economy, it's not something that contributes to the economy, it harms the economy. If you're a speculator, you will move your money away from a currency where people are trying to stimulate the economy, because that might bring higher interest rates. And of course you'll flee from places with social support systems, health and education, which contribute to economic growth as well as human welfare. These are tendencies which drag down growth and they have exploded enormously since the early 1970s. I'll just give you some numbers... In 1970 about 10 per cent of international financial transactions were speculative, and about 90 per cent were related to the real economy, investment and trade. By 1990, those figures had reversed. By 1995 about 95 per cent was speculative, and furthermore the quantity just exploded. It's now over a trillion dollars a day, which just moves from one financial exchange to another... A lot of it is just speculating against currencies and things like that. And that's had an extremely harmful effect on the economy. It's exploded very fast, and it was not true in the early part of the century. So that's a new phenomenon, a very dangerous one, which is harming the economy considerably. It can be stopped. It's a decision to allow it to happen, but it's the decision that's been made, and a lot of people benefit from it. The top few per cent of the population, ranked by wealth, probably benefit from it enormously. Most people do not. In fact, they may be harmed... If you look at trade, trade relative to the size of the economy, trade is pretty much on the order of what it was early in the

century. However it's different in character. A good deal of what's called trade now is not trade. For example, probably half of US trade with Mexico is internal to a particular corporation. Take a company, say Ford Motor Company, who put together some parts in Indiana and then send them to Mexico where they've got super-cheap labor and no environmental constraints, and there they'll be assembled, and then they'll send them back to the United States to turn them into a car. Well, that's called exports to Mexico and imports to the United States. But Adam Smith wouldn't have called it trade. It's internal to a totalitarian institution; it's internal to a huge command economy, the Ford Motor Company. What goes on internal to Ford is not free trade, it's a command economy. And that's a big piece of trade, it's now estimated roughly about 40 per cent, for the major economic powers. These numbers are very indefinite, because we're dealing with totalitarian institutions. They don't tell you what they're doing, so it's very hard to get good data as to what's really happening. But the estimates of international economists are mostly in this range. O.K. now, that's not trade at all. That's internal operations of command economies.

The neo-liberal argument as put forward by The Economist, for instance, is: Mexicans benefit. They have jobs. How do you...

Sure, they benefit greatly. You can tell how they benefit. During the period of neo-liberalism for over ten years now, Mexican wages have dropped about 40% or 50%. And nutritional levels have collapsed. And millions of people have been driven off the farms. The standard of living has become far lower. But a sector of Mexicans have benefited. For example, the number of billionaires has gone way up. And that, from *The Economist's* point of view, is great. Economists have a concept of economic health, which is divorced from the health of the economy. Economic health has to do with macro-economic statistics. So, what's the inflation rate, what's the growth of the GDP, and so on and so forth. It has nothing to do with the health of the economy. By those standards, Mexico has been regarded as an "economic miracle." It was the same with Brazil. Brazil was regarded as an "economic miracle" until 1989. It had the far highest growth rate in Latin America, much higher than Chile. It was considered a great "success story of American capitalism." From the mid-1940s, it was described as a "testing area for scientific methods of development by the methods of American capitalism." It was "the Latin American darling of the business community," as the business press put it. And it was just marvelous for about 10% of the population. So, about 10% of the population was like Paris, and London, and New York. And the other 90% ranged from suffering to total misery. If you look at the ranking of Brazil by the UN human development statistics, it ranked next to Albania.

But it was an economic miracle by the measures that count. For rich people. These are highly ideological disciplines, and highly ideological numbers. The system impacts on Mexicans in such a way as to lower their incomes radically, to drive them off the land, to lower their health, and so on. That's the way it interacts with Mexicans. Now the *maquilladoras*,¹ the foreign companies that have invested there, they have virtually no linkage to the Mexican economy. Their inputs come from here; their outputs return here. They do use very cheap labor and benefit from the brutality of the labor system, which prevents people from organizing, and the lack of environmental controls and so on, and you could say, look, like *The Economist* says, at least they have some jobs. Yeah, they have some jobs. On the other hand, if Mexico was organized differently, and not under the control of foreign investors, they could have quite different kinds of jobs, better ones...

And about the American aspect of globalization. Do you see globalization as being a new form of American dominance, in the same way as in the past you had British globalization, or semi-globalization?

In every period of modern history there has been some level of globalization. In the early part of this century, it was high and then it went down. Now it's going up. Whatever it is, it's to the benefit of the more powerful. That's almost a trivium. In the early part of the century, Britain was a hegemonic power. It had a very substantial role in the world, a leading role in fact. Britain was called liberal, so it was supposed to believe in free trade. That was mostly fraud. For example, something like 40% of their exports went to the colonies. By the 1920s, Britain realized that it could no longer compete with the Japanese, who had the highest growth rate from about 1870 up till the 1990s. Japan was liberal, by some measures. It had plenty of state subsidy and support. But it had a kind of liberal trading system. Well, they were just undercutting British manufacturers. They were cheaper and better. And the British reacted exactly as expected. They closed off the Empire. So in 1932, Britain had closed off the Empire, which it controlled, to Japanese exports. That's part of the background for the Pacific War. That's British liberalism. The United States is the same. Britain turned to liberalism in 1846, after a hundred and fifty years of very high protectionism, violence, development of a powerful state. They had wiped out Indian industry. They were now in the process of

1. *Maquilladoras* are factories set up alongside the U.S. border in Mexico. They provide U.S. companies with cheap parts or products manufactured by people who are paid very low wages and do not have health coverage or other benefits typical in a European Welfare state.

wiping out Chinese industry. They blocked Egyptian development. In fact, the only parts of the world that developed were those out of European control: the United States and Japan. But by then Britain had about twice the per capita industrialization of any other country, as a result of these measures. So they figured a level playing field would be fine, and they moved to “free trade,” but with extreme reservations: control of the Empire, protected markets, and so on. About a hundred years later, the same thing happened in the United States.

The US is a much stronger power than Britain was in the 19th century.

Sure, by the turn of the century, the United States had a bigger economy than Britain, France and Germany combined. It was a super-rich country. But it didn't become a major player in the world until the Second World War. In 1945, the United States was in a position to basically take over the world. And it of course moved to do so. And for the first time in its history it turned to a kind of liberal internationalism. The United States has always been a highly protectionist country. That's how it developed. It developed by blocking British textiles, blocking British steel, developing its own industry with state subsidies, a big internal market, so it developed the same way every other country developed, by protectionism, state power, violence, and so on. But by 1945, it looked as if it were just overwhelmingly more powerful than anyone else, so it called for a liberal international trading order. But of course it didn't believe in it. So, the United States relied very heavily on public subsidies. That's why you have computers and the Internet, and airplanes and biotechnology, and so on. It's all massively subsidized by the public, which is a radical violation of free trade. And the whole dynamic sector of the American economy is like this. There are variations over time. The Reaganites were extreme opponents of free trade. They were the most protectionist administration in post-war American history. They literally doubled protection on imports. They simply blocked the Japanese out of the US market in semi-conductors and electronics, computers, automobiles, steel and so on. They poured funds in under the pretext of military spending, which is the usual way you fund... You get the public to fund the rich. And as a result they reconstructed a dynamic American economy, by radical violation of free trade, the most extreme since the Second World War. Other countries are sort of similar. They all play more or less the same way. If you look at the current trade agreements, they're called free trade agreements, but that's a joke. They're a mixture of liberalization and protectionism, carefully geared to the interests of the powerful. So one crucial part of the so-called free trade agreement is what's called intellectual property rights.

Can you be specific?

Intellectual property rights are an attempt to impose on the third world—the developing, or non-developed countries—protectionist restrictions far more extreme than the rich countries ever accepted. The United States, Germany, and France and so on, never accepted patent rules even remotely like those that are now to be imposed on the rest of the world. These are not only process patents, but even product patents. France is perhaps the only country that even experimented with product patents. That's one of the things that killed the French chemical industry. It shifted it over to Switzerland, because it was so destructive. Let's make it concrete. Suppose Merck, the pharmaceutical company, develops some drug, and then some scientists in India, which has a big pharmaceutical industry, look at that drug and figure out a smarter way to make it. It used to be possible for them to do so, because it was only the process that was patented. The new rules say no, they can't do it, because they're making a product that is patented. So, the effect is to drive down growth, to cut down innovation, to make people poorer, to prevent the third world from gaining technology, and to ensure that the rich and powerful control even more. What's that got to do with free trade? I mean, David Ricardo wouldn't even have laughed. This is not free trade. This is sheer protectionism in the interests of quasi-totalitarian institutions, like multi-national corporations, which conduct what they call trade, but a lot of it is internal. It's a kind of corporate mercantilism, with very powerful states running it.

But to go back to globalization...

Going back to globalization. About three quarters of all of these interactions are within the triad, Europe, Japan and the United States. Where's the rest of the world? Also, these are three areas where there are at least, formally speaking, democratic controls. There aren't going to be military coups, which means these developments can be controlled by public decision. They are not "out of control." It's a decision. The business press is extremely frank. It talks about "capital's clear subjugation of labor" in the last twenty years, a "radical shift in the economic balance of power" into the hands of management. It's true, and it's not just management, but financial institutions that have a big rentier client base. Well, these are human institutions, which can be changed, and the left is interested in changing them. So, let's be quite concrete. There's a new investment agreement coming along; it's being rammed through in secret, more or less: the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) that's being worked on at the OECD and the World Trade Organization. It's an agreement designed to free and to provide enormous rights to investors at the expense

of citizens around the world. Now, it's being done more or less in secret, because if people knew what was going on, they would be horrified. Journalists certainly know about it, but I have yet to see a single report about it in the mainstream in the United States... At the World Trade Organization it's being blocked by India and Malaysia, and other countries who don't want to totally sell out to foreign corporations. But at the OECD, it will probably go through, mostly in secret, and then it'll be passed through "fast track" legislation,² so it is hoped. That's what lies behind much of the passionate support for "fast track." It is designed to deter the threat of democracy. Then people will be locked into a treaty which grants investors incredible rights.

You can get a sense of the rights that they're going to have by just looking at what they're doing right now. NAFTA has some of these rights, and they're being tested. The Ethyl corporation, which produces leaded gasoline, which is outlawed almost everywhere, also produces other additives for gasoline, which are outlawed in just about every country, including the United States, because they're carcinogenic. Canada didn't yet have a law outlawing them, and the Canadian Parliament just tried to pass laws outlawing these additives. The Ethyl corporation is suing Canada, under NAFTA, claiming that that's expropriation of property. In other words, if Canada wants to eliminate an additive that they claim is carcinogenic, and which incidentally is banned in the United States, the Ethyl corporation says, "Well, you're stealing our property, and that's expropriation, and therefore you'll have to pay damages, or else you can't do this, under NAFTA rules."

Well, who decides this?

Not the Canadian courts. No, this goes to an international arbitration board made up of businessmen, who operate in secret and aren't accountable, and they come down with a decision, whatever it will be. This is a small point, but the Multilateral Agreement on Investment is intended to open this up totally, so that if any country, or any local community say Boston, if Boston wants to have investment directed, targeted to poorer communities, or to, say, allow rights for women, or to meet environmental conditions, or almost anything you can imagine, a foreign corporation can

2. "Fast track" is a way for American presidents to bypass Congress when negotiating trade deals. When Congress passes so-called "fast track legislation," as it did between 1974 and 1996, trade deals are not discussed in detail. President Clinton who wanted to get "fast track legislation" passed in November 1997 had to contend with determined opposition on the part of many democrats and the labor movement among others. Clinton decided not to press for a vote when it became clear that it would mean defeat.

come in and sue the city of Boston under this new treaty and say you're not allowed to do that. On the other hand, the new treaty does not permit citizens or a government to sue corporations. It's completely one-way. And it goes on and on like this. Well, this is a matter of extreme importance. The left is interested in trying to make it public; the mainstream wants to keep it silent and so far has succeeded, which is quite remarkable. You may be for this or against this, but that it's important is undoubted. It's moving right along, and I have yet to see one word about it outside the marginal press. It's a major event, a major issue in the OECD. But it's not the kind of thing you write about. Someday it'll appear on the business pages, and most of the population still won't understand what's going on, what's hitting them. So... is the left active? Sure, the left is very active. They're running conferences on these things, having meetings about them, distributing information, organizing. As I say, it's much more lively than it was in the 1960's. It's about all kinds of issues, and it's made a lot of progress. But if you ask, does it have political parties or large-scale organizations, or journals, and so on, then the answers have to be mostly negative.

Now let's move to the realm of culture. Do you think that the current type of globalization is different from the past one? You mentioned in the early part of the interview something about shifts in language, saying that the word "libertarian" has changed its meaning in the US. Do you feel that here's a kind of American hegemony that is strong in the field of culture?

It's quite dramatic in Europe. I go to Europe occasionally. Europe is visibly losing cultural independence and adopting American doctrinal positions. People talk about music, and I'm sure that's true, but what interests me is another aspect, what I see among the intellectuals, where there has been a remarkable subordination to American ideology. European newspapers, to me look more and more like yesterday's *The New York Times*. For example, let's take the "peace process" in the Middle East—a process that is modeled on the homelands policy in South Africa.

But, this one is called the Peace Process. Well, it's very interesting to look at. I don't have time to go through the details here, but in fact we do find that from about 1970 to 1990, the United States stood alone in the world along with Israel in blocking any kind of negotiation or political settlement on the Arab-Israeli problem. The reason was that the US differed from the rest of the world on two issues. One, the rest of the world interpreted the basic document UN 242 as calling for Israeli withdrawal. The US had interpreted it that way, but in 1971 it switched to interpreting it to mean partial withdrawal as the U.S and Israel determined. The reason for that was that Egypt had accepted the US position, and put the US in the

dilemma of either having to accept Egypt and separate from Israel, or go along with Israel's refusal to withdraw. The second choice was taken. All right, from then until today, the United States has differed from the rest of the world in interpreting UN 242, the basic document, as not requiring full withdrawal. The second big difference is from the mid-seventies, when the international consensus shifted to recognition of Palestinian rights. The US was opposed to that. So it vetoed every resolution of the Security Council and voted alone with Israel year after year at the General Assembly. It blocked every other initiative from Europe and from the Third World, Palestinians, anyone. So, the US and Israel were alone in an extreme version of rejectionism: partial withdrawal only, no Palestinian rights. After the Gulf War, the United States was in a powerful enough position to institute its own super-rejectionist program, along the lines of the last twenty years. That's what's called the "peace process," and the rest of the world is accepting that as a peace process. I discover with interest when I go to places like India and Brazil, and of course Europe, that many people have forgotten what they believed five years ago.

But is it the result of pressure on the part of the US?

I think it's something much deeper. It's the result of deep subordination to US power. The process has become internalized in people's minds. The US calls it a peace process, therefore it's a peace process, even if it's in fact a Bantustan process, which we vigorously opposed for twenty years. They have the power, and we accept what they say. The left press in Europe calls it a peace process. Did they ever refer to South Africa's Bantustan program as a peace process?

Well, there are papers like Le Monde diplomatique...

Le Monde diplomatique is different. It is one of the very few examples which have not joined into this... There are other cases. The London *Guardian* hasn't totally succumbed. You can find scattered examples, but overwhelmingly, it's been accepted. As for *Le Monde diplomatique*, you're right, they have not assimilated themselves to the subordination to US ideology, which is very dramatic in Europe, and even more so in the Third World. And understandable. That's where wealth and power are, and intellectuals go where wealth and power are. After all, why were intellectuals drawn to Leninism? Leninism was a doctrine that said intellectuals have a right to rule the world. That's attractive to intellectuals. And as long as they thought that there was some hope of that intellectuals were drawn to Leninism. When they recognized there wasn't much hope of that, those very same intellectuals moved to the right, often the far right. I

don't even think many of them changed their beliefs and attitudes; they just changed their commitments.

In a way, you anticipate my question. Since you talked about Israel, you know that some of your critics, whether from the left or from the right, call you a "self-hating Jew," or they criticize your belief in a two-State solution...

First of all, I have never been enthusiastic about a two-State solution, so they can't criticize me for that.

They claim that you have this fallacious idea that a two-State solution is possible...

That's very interesting, because the two-State solution that I didn't advocate is exactly what was advocated by mainstream opinion in Europe for twenty years. Is that an exotic position? The position of every European government? I mean, you're talking to people who are so unconnected with the world, that they can't even... it's hard even to discuss things with them.

But do you analyze this as the same kind of approach as saying, "He's a Marxist, he's a self-hating Jew, therefore we must..."

What do you mean? Why am I self-hating? When I go to Israel, as I did a few months ago, if I'm a self-hating Jew, how come the press is full of favorable reports, very sympathetic interviews, long discussions... I have a file this thick of interviews... If I'm a self-hating Jew...

You also say that the press is freer in Israel...

It's not "freer," it's just not insane. I mean, what makes me a self-hating Jew? What is the evidence...? Look, suppose I say you are a child abuser? Do you have to answer that? Suppose I say, look, I spoke to somebody who told me you abuse children? Do you have to answer that question? It's beneath your dignity to answer the question.

No, no the question is: Can you explain how this works, the strategy behind it?

I think it's very easy to explain. If you're an intellectual, and you're at least smart enough to know that you can't answer somebody's arguments because you don't know the facts, and you can't follow the arguments, and you don't have the evidence, if you're at least that smart, what you do is

what a construction worker does in a 3rd Avenue bar in New York: you scream at him. Now, if you're in the 3rd Avenue bar, you use four-letter words. If you're an intellectual, you use bigger words. You use words like "Marxist," or "Living Marxism," or "conspiracy theory," or "self-hating Jew." These are the intellectual equivalents of four-letter words. You know you can't answer arguments, and you'd better keep away from the arena of serious discussion, so you just throw smut. It's very standard. Intellectuals do it just like everyone else. But they do it with bigger words.

On the Arab-Israeli conflict, is there a left in the US? I mean, it seems that left voices—left in the sense of being in favor of progress, more justice, and so on—in the way you define it, after rejection...

Here, again, again, there's a difficulty in responding. This is a country that is very heavily polled. Business wants its finger on the public pulse, so there's a huge amount of evidence about public attitudes. And they're interesting. So, for example, the American public over a long period has been about two to one in favor of a Palestinian state. Does that make them the American left? I mean, the US government happens to be totally opposed, but the population is about two to one in favor, and that's kind of interesting. Because, that's without anyone publicly advocating it—I mean, if people didn't publicly advocate it, it's because the intellectuals who reach an audience are the ones who keep very close to the official line, so they're in favor of what they call the Peace Process, not the international consensus of the past twenty years. Nevertheless, the population was about two to one in favor. So who's the left?

Why don't the authorities pay the political price if...

Because, although they're in favor, those two-thirds of the population don't care about it. It's one thing to have an opinion, and it's another thing to do something about it. Furthermore, they see no way of doing anything about it. Remember, about 80% of the population here regards the government as just a farce. About 80% of the population says that the government works for "the few and the special interests," not for "the people." That's why people don't even bother voting. This is a very free society, but it's also a very atomized society. People are separated from one another. It's a disintegrated society. People do not have political organizations. You don't get together to work out political ideas and programs. As I mentioned, even the labor movement, which has often been a force for democracy and change, is very scattered into fragments in part by law and violence, but in part for other reasons... The result is people have all kinds of attitudes, but they don't express themselves in political

action. The very narrow sectors of power and privilege can do what they like in a very free society. That's some of the complexity of human life.

On immigration there seems to be a rift among left-wingers and liberals. On the one hand, labor unionists, fearing for their jobs and wages, oppose massive unrestricted immigration; on the other cultural leftists reject the idea of a "reserve army" of low paid workers and welcome the diversity brought by immigration and find themselves on the same side as the world of business. How do you analyze the situation?

On attitudes towards immigration, it's understandable why people whose lives may be harmed by immigration would be opposed to it. CEOs would be opposed if there was a massive immigration of highly qualified replacements for them at lower salaries. The academic/professional worlds have generally reacted negatively when waves of immigration (fleeing Nazism, for example) threatened their positions of prestige and privilege. As for the academic left, I doubt that there is much of a consensus. There's a conflict of principles, and people try to resolve it in various ways. One thing is clear: if there were anyone who really believed in free trade and markets (it would be hard to find any), they would certainly favor freedom of movement of people, independently of borders.

It seems that in the US it's far more fashionable, in the academy at least, but also in the press, to talk about race, possibly gender, but not to talk about class, except in terms of "classism," which is not really talking about class.

Well, "class" is a four-letter word in the United States, a dangerous word. This, as I say, is a business-run society, and everything is set up in such a way that you shall not see a fundamental or social conflict over power. There is one sector of the population which does talk about class all the time: the business world. If you read the business press, it's full of talk about class. In fact, they regard themselves, quite consciously, as being engaged in bitter class warfare. And in the business press you find discussion about "the rising political power of the masses" and how we have to keep them down and "fight the everlasting battle for the minds of men" and ensure that the lower classes are subordinated. This is all over the business press. But outside the vulgar Marxist sectors of the business press, it is considered impolite to talk about these matters. In fact, the United States is one of the very few countries where the census reports, which are very detailed, don't include information about class. The United States is one of the very few countries that do not estimate social indicators. There's a ton of statistics about people, but it's very hard to find

social indicators because they don't gather them. There's a medical researcher at Johns Hopkins University who wanted—it's well known that there are big differences in health between blacks and whites, so they're race differences—who was interested in asking how much of this was a class difference and how much was a race difference, because of course there's a race/class correlation. Well, he had a hard time first of all, because the US doesn't give data on class like in other countries. But when he used complicated measures to try to sort out these two factors, he submitted his article to the leading American journals, and they turned it down. He finally published the article in the *Lancet*, which is the British medical journal, the world's most famous medical journal. There, they could conceive of an article on class and health. Here, it's excluded from the domain of polite discourse, except in the business press, where it's all over...

You call them "vulgar Marxists"... Is it the reason why you seem to prefer The Wall Street Journal to the newspaper of record, The New York Times?

I mean vulgar Marxists in the sense that they accept a kind of vulgar version of Marxist doctrine and shift all the values...

Do you feel you learn more by reading The Wall Street Journal than by reading The New York Times?

No. Actually, the reporting in *The Wall Street Journal* happens to be of a quite high quality. Typically. For all sorts of reasons, partly because they trust their audience, I guess. The editorial pages are just a comic strip, but the reporting is extremely good, and in fact often very critical of business practices. They can sort of get away with it. Same is true for *Business Week*. For example, the Reagan administration, which was a criminal state, I mean not only its international behavior, which was war crimes all over the place, but even internally, the Reagan administration essentially informed the American business community that they were not going to enforce the laws on labor organization, here are all kinds of laws on illegal labor practices, on health and safety standards and so on, and the Reagan administration made it clear to the business community that they were not going to enforce the laws. So the number of workers illegally fired for trying to organize went way up, and the number of injuries went way up, and so on. And the only place I saw this reported on honestly was in *Business Week*.

Can one say that full objectivity is impossible in the media today, that objectivity is an old-fashioned idea?

The statement that “full objectivity is impossible” is hardly a matter of contention, if it is understood to mean that we cannot be other than the creatures that we are. The fact that experience is in part a construction of our modes of cognition was understood in the 17th century, not to speak of our richer interpretations of experience within explanatory theories; all of this reached the level of “conventional wisdom” not long after. The standard modern outlook is, I think, pretty much as described by historian of philosophy Richard Popkin, discussing the anti-foundationalism of the 17th century reaction to the Cartesian skeptical crisis: “the recognition that absolutely certain grounds could not be given for our knowledge, and yet that we possess standards for evaluating the reliability and applicability of what we have found out about the world,” thus “accepting and increasing the knowledge itself” while recognizing that “the secrets of nature, of things-in-themselves, are forever hidden from us.” The sciences take this for granted, as do other branches of rational inquiry. The fact that we are part of the natural world and cannot escape our own minds does not in the least entail that we should abandon the effort to try to gain the clearest understanding of the world we can, and to subject our beliefs, conceptual apparatus, and conclusions to the harshest tests we can devise. This seems close to truism. On recent versions of these matters, one can raise various questions, perhaps worth inquiry, but that is a different matter.

I'd like to end with what you said about people not being able to understand the concept of free speech in France...

France is the only country I know where the courts have held that the State has the right to determine historical truth, and to punish deviation from it. France is the only country I know where there is a law that says that it's a crime to question the conclusions of International Tribunals.

Are you trying...

Well, there is the case of the law that was applied against Bernard Lewis. He is an American, a well-known American scholar, who happens to be pretty supportive of Turkey, and apparently he made some remark in France—I don't know exactly what he said—about the Armenian genocide. He was brought to court, and tried, and punished, because—maybe—let's say he was supporting genocide, I don't care what he's saying—he didn't follow what the French state has determined to be the truth. So therefore he's punished. And that caused a furore here, because here, there's a

concept of freedom of speech. Incidentally, when France does exactly the same thing with Holocaust revisionists, it doesn't cause any furore here. Because here, though they accept the concept of free speech, it's very sharply honed. You do it to Bernard Lewis, who's a professor at Princeton, and a respectable guy, and can't get away with it. You do it to somebody whom everyone hates, and you do get away with it. But it's the same law. And France is one of the very few countries...

I think they have strict laws in Germany too, the idea being that you have to restrict racist speech.

It's hard to accept that claim. For example, in the United States, there are prominent and respected intellectuals who describe the Holocaust as an "exploded fiction," right in the mainstream, referring to the Nazi slaughter of the Gypsies and rejecting the contention that the Gypsies were treated like the Jews. Have any of them been subjected to freedom of speech restriction? Or even criticized? The Gypsies, who were treated just like Jews, are still persecuted in Europe so that Holocaust denials, in this case, including the kind of ridicule I just quoted, contributes directly to repression and terror. But does anyone get prosecuted for their "negationism" about the crimes against Gypsies? No. There are no laws against hate speech. There are laws against people you hate. That's something quite different.

