

Wittgenstein's Poker and the Indispensable Chomsky

Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889-1951, and Noam Chomsky, 74, have a few things in common. Wittgenstein, a professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge in England, turned philosophical discourse upside down by examining its language. Chomsky, a linguistics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has done the same for political discourse. Both must be ignored for “normal” mainstream philosophy and politics to continue. Both largely are ignored in this country for exactly this reason. Two books recently hit the shelves that give a taste of each.

Wittgenstein's Poker is a 300-page story of a 10-minute debate between Wittgenstein and Karl Popper. Each was a renowned philosopher of the time and each was born and raised in Vienna of Jewish heritage within a mile of each other, but they never met before or since the 10-minute exchange in which Popper later accused Wittgenstein of threatening him with a fireplace poker. Little is actually known of exactly what happened in those ten minutes, but to get there authors David Edmonds and John Eidinow describe the philosophical circles surrounding Bertrand Russell at Cambridge in the '20s, '30s, and '40s, the personal histories of the three men, the controversies raised by Wittgenstein's thought, and the treatment of Jews in Austria under the Third Reich, among many other things. *Wittgenstein's Poker* is entertaining, instructive, and quick to read because of its fascinating subjects.

In his classes at Cambridge, and most strikingly in his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein challenged the notion that there are real philosophical problems. Once the syntax and meaning of language are thoroughly tested, what's left are not philosophical problems, but puzzles or language games. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein tells us that a true philosopher treats a “philosophical” question like a disease to be cured and that the goal is to show the fly the way out of the jar.

You get a glimpse of this in *Wittgenstein's Poker*, but the value of the book is rather the historical context. What struck me most about the work, however, was its abject failure to even recognize the one moral problem of this history. The Wittgenstein family was one of the wealthiest families in all Austria at the time. Father Karl was a steel baron the equivalent of Carnegie or Rockefeller. (Ludwig ultimately rejected the wealth and supported himself as a schoolteacher and professor.) By the time of the “Anschluss” by Hitler's Germany, the family money had been safely invested abroad, but Ludwig's sisters were trapped in Austria as “three-quarter Jews” and destined for the concentration camps. Brother Paul was living in America and arranged to buy the sisters' freedom with the family fortune. The authors never appear to have even seen the moral dilemma of handing over to the Nazis enough resources to have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

A short excerpt:

In the eighteenth century, the Scottish philosopher David Hume first questioned the process of inductive reasoning: just because the sun has risen every day so far, asked Hume, do we have any rational reason for believing that it will rise again tomorrow?

Hume thought not. An appeal to the laws of nature, for example, would simply take us round a circular argument. The only reason we have for believing in the laws of nature is that they have proved dependable in the past. But why should we assume that past reliability is any sort of guide to the future? Bertrand Russell, with his instinct for the arresting image, put the same riddle this way: “The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken.

Noam Chomsky is easily the most brilliant and radical political thinker of our time. As with Wittgenstein, to understand him is to reject everything you have ever heard or thought you knew about the subject. Together these two men have molded my soul and being. As with Wittgenstein, you must forget everything Chomsky has ever taught you if you are to find a respectable place in the mainstream. Chomsky usually backs up what he says with analytical studies and an awesome wealth of political and historical knowledge.

Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel compiled a decade of Chomsky’s public lectures in their *Understanding Power, The Indispensable Chomsky*, hot off the press. The four-hundred page tome would have been over 1,000 pages but for a radical device that I believe is a first with this work. Over 500 pages of footnotes have been placed online rather than at the end of the book. The book has its own website, understandingpower.com. The works and studies mentioned in these extensive online footnotes, compiled with the help of Chomsky himself, would take multiple lifetimes of mere mortals to digest.

In a question and answer period, the format that comprises the bulk of *Understanding Power*, a man asks Chomsky “how long...the American government and other powerful interests in the country could count on the participation of the major media in framing topics and reporting issues more or less they way they want them reported.” Chomsky responds: “Well, you know, I haven’t looked at the entire history, but I would guess since about 1775,” then elaborates:

If you look back at the Revolutionary War period, you’ll find that Revolutionary War leaders, people like Thomas Jefferson (who’s regarded as a great libertarian, and with some reason), were saying that people should be punished if they are, in his words, “traitors in thought but not in deed”— meaning they should be punished if they say things that are treacherous, or even if they think things that are treacherous. And during the Revolutionary War, there was vicious repression of dissident opinion.

Well, it just goes on from there. Today the methods are different—now it’s not the threat of force that ensures the media will present things within a framework that serves the interests of the dominant institutions, the mechanisms today are much more subtle. But nevertheless, there is a complex system of filters in the media and educational institutions which ends up ensuring that dissident perspectives are weeded out, or marginalized in one way or another. And the end result is in fact quite similar: what are called opinions “on the left” and “on the right” in the media represent only a limited spectrum of debate, which reflects the range of needs of private power—but

there's essentially nothing beyond those "acceptable" positions.

So what the media do, in effect, is to take the set of assumptions which express the basic ideas of the propaganda system, whether about the Cold War or the economic system or the "national interest" and so on, and then present a range of debate within that framework—so the debate only enhances the strength of the assumptions, ingraining them in people's minds as the entire possible spectrum of opinion that there is. So you see, in our system what you might call "state propaganda" isn't expressed as such, as it would be in a totalitarian society—rather it's implicit, it's presupposed, it provides the framework for debate among the people who are admitted into mainstream discussion.

Chomsky later informs us that this explains why *he* is marginalized. This is not a conspiracy theory, nor any theory at all, he says, but an observation and the very opposite of a conspiracy theory. It would be surprising if this *weren't* the case, he says, because you would expect large corporate media institutions to act in their own interests.

The subjects range from the Middle East to inner city schools to what Chomsky calls "the permanent war economy." Chomsky's works on linguistics are studied all over the world. Whether history will remember him more for these than for his politics remains to be seen. Chomsky is alive and well and teaching at M.I.T.

Wittgenstein's Poker, David Edmonds and John Eidinow, 2001, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

Understanding Power, Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel, 2002, The New Press, 450 West 41st Street, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10036, www.thenewpress.com.