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His Right to Say It

Noam Chomsky

February 28, 1981

An article in the *New York Times* concerning my involvement in the “Faurisson affair” was headlined “French Storm in a Demitasse.” If the intent was to imply that these events do not even merit being called “a tempest in a teapot,” I am inclined to agree. Nevertheless, torrents of ink have been spilled in Europe, and some here. Perhaps, given the obfuscatory nature of the coverage, it would be useful for me to state the basic facts as I understand them and to say a few words about the principles that arise.

In the fall of 1979, I was asked by Serge Thion, a libertarian socialist scholar with a record of opposition to all forms of totalitarianism, to sign a petition calling on authorities to insure Robert Faurisson’s “safety and the free exercise of his legal rights.” The petition said nothing about his “holocaust studies” (he denies the existence of gas chambers or of a systematic plan to massacre the Jews and questions the authenticity of the Anne Frank diary, among other things), apart from noting that they were the cause of “efforts to deprive Professor Faurisson of his freedom of speech and expression.” It did not specify the steps taken against him, which include suspension from his teaching position at the University of Lyons after the threat of

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violence, and a forthcoming court trial for falsification of history and damages to victims of Nazism.

The petition aroused considerable protest. In *Nouvel Observateur*, Claude Roy wrote that “the appeal launched by Chomsky” supported Faurisson’s views. Roy explained my alleged stand as an attempt to show that the United States is indistinguishable from Nazi Germany. In *Esprit*, Pierre Vidal-Naquet found the petition “scandalous” on the ground that it “presented his ‘conclusions’ as if they were actually discoveries.” Vidal-Naquet misunderstood a sentence in the petition that ran, “Since he began making his findings public, Professor Faurisson has been subject to....” The term “findings” is quite neutral. One can say, without contradiction: “He made his findings public and they were judged worthless, irrelevant, falsified....” The petition implied nothing about quality of Faurisson’s work, which was irrelevant to the issues raised.

Thion then asked me to write a brief statement on the purely civil libertarian aspects of this affair. I did so, telling him to use it as he wished. In this statement, I made it explicit that I would not discuss Faurisson’s work, having only limited familiarity with it (and, frankly, little interest in it). Rather, I restricted myself to the civil-liberties issues and the implications of the fact that it was even necessary to recall Voltaire’s famous words in a letter to M. le Riche: “I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write.”

Faurisson’s conclusions are diametrically opposed to views I hold and have frequently expressed in print (for example, in my book *Peace in the Middle East?*, where I describe the holocaust as “the most fantastic outburst of collective insanity in human history”). But it is elementary that freedom of expression (including academic freedom) is not to be restricted to views of which one approves, and that it is precisely in the case of views that are almost universally despised and condemned that this right must be most vigorously defended. It is easy enough to defend those who need no defense or to join in unanimous (and

often justified) condemnation of a violation of civil rights by some official enemy.

I later learned that my statement was to appear in a book in which Faurisson defends himself against the charges soon to be brought against him in court. While this was not my intention, it was not contrary to my instructions. I received a letter from Jean-Pierre Faye, a well-known anti-Fascist writer and militant, who agreed with my position but urged me to withhold my statement because the climate of opinion in France was such that my defense of Faurisson's right to express his views would be interpreted as support for them. I wrote to him that I accepted his judgment, and requested that my statement not appear, but by then it was too late to stop publication.

Parts of my letter to Faye appeared in the French press and have been widely quoted and misquoted and subjected to fantastic interpretations. It was reported, for example, that I repudiated my comments after having learned that there is anti-Semitism in France, and that I was changing my views on the basis of clippings from the French press (in the same letter, I had asked Faye to send me clippings on another matter). My personal letter to Faye was incomprehensible to anyone who had not read Faye's original letter to me; a telephone call would quickly have clarified the facts.

The uproar that ensued is of some interest. In *Le Matin* (socialist), Jacques Baynac wrote that my fundamental error was to "defend, in the name of freedom of expression, the right to mock the facts" — "facts" determined, presumably, by some board of commissars or a reconstituted Inquisition. My lengthy discussion on the implications of this doctrine was from the occasionally recognizable version of the interview with me published in *Le Matin*. In *Le Monde*, the editor of *Esprit*, Paul Thibaud, wrote that I had condemned "the entire French intelligentsia," launching a "general accusation" against "les Francais" without qualifications. Alberto Cavallari, Paris correspondent for the *Corriere della Sera* went further still,

claiming that I had condemned all of “French culture.” The article is notable for a series of fabricated quotes designed to establish this and other allegations. What I had written was that though I would make some harsh comments about “certain segments of the French intelligentsia... certainly, what I say does not apply to many others, who maintain a firm commitment to intellectual integrity...I would not want these comments to be misunderstood as applying beyond their specific scope.” Similar qualifications are removed from the doctored “interview” in *Le Matin*, enabling the editors to allege that I describe France as “totalitarian.”

Cavallari went on to explain that my rage against “French culture” derives from its refusal to accept the theory that linguistics proves that “the Gulag descends directly from Rousseau” and other imbecile ideas he chooses to attribute to me for reasons best known to himself. In *Nouvel Observateur*, Jean-Paul Enthoven offers a different explanation: I support Faurisson because my “instrumentalist theory of language, the ‘generative grammar’...does not allow the means to think of the unimaginable, that is the holocaust.” He and Cavallari, among others, explain further that my defense of Faurisson is a case of the extreme left joining the extreme right, a phenomenon to which they devote many sage words. In *Le Matin*, Catherine Clement explains my odd behavior on the ground that I am a “perfect Bostonian,” “a cold and distant man, without real social contacts, incapable of understanding Jewish-American humor, which relies heavily on Yiddish.” Pierre Daix explains in *Le Quotidien de Paris* that I took up left-wing causes to “clear myself” of the reactionary implications of my “innatism.” And so on, at about the same level.

To illustrate the caliber of discussion, after I had noted that Vidal-Naquet’s comment cited above was based on a misunderstanding, he reprinted his article in a book (*Les Juifs*, F. Maspero), eliminating the passage I quoted and adding an appendix in which he claims falsely that “the error in question

mentary in *Le Monde* and *Liberation*, for example, and a few people have taken a clear and honorable stand. Thus Alfred Grosser, who is critical of what he believes to be my position, writes in *Le Quotidien de Paris*: “I consider it shocking that Mr. Faurisson should be prevented from teaching French literature at the University of Lyons on the pretext that his security cannot be guaranteed.”

In the Italian left-liberal journal *Repubblica*, Barbara Spinelli writes that the real scandal in this affair is the fact that even a few people publicly affirm their support of the right to express ideas that are almost universally reviled — and that happen to be diametrically opposed to their own. My own observation is different. It seems to me something of a scandal that it is even necessary to debate these issues two centuries after Voltaire defended the right of free expression for views he detested. It is a poor service to the memory of the victims of the holocaust to adopt a central doctrine of their murderers.

failure of socialism.” Many left or ex-left intellectuals seem unaware that I never have regarded Leninist movements as having anything to do with “socialism” in any meaningful sense of the term; or that, having grown up in the libertarian anti-Leninist left, familiar since childhood with works that Thibaud has still never heard of, I am unimpressed with their recent conversions and unwilling to join in their new crusades, which often strike me as morally dubious and intellectually shallow. All of this has led to a great deal of bitterness on their part and not a little outright deceit.

As for the resurgence of anti-Semitism to which the PEN Club refers, or of racist atrocities, one may ask if the proper response to publication of material that may be used to enhance racist violence and oppression is to deny civil rights. Or is it, rather, to seek the causes of these vicious developments and work to eliminate them? To a person who upholds the basic ideas professed in the Western democracies, or who is seriously concerned with the real evils that confront us, the answer seems clear.

There are, in fact, far more dangerous manifestations of “revisionism” than Faurisson’s. Consider the effort to show that the United States engaged in no crimes in Vietnam, that it was guilty only of “intellectual error.” This “revisionism,” in contrast to that of Faurisson, is supported by the major institutions and has always been the position of most of the intelligentsia, and has very direct and ugly policy consequences. Should we then argue that people advocating this position be suspended from teaching and brought to trial? The issue is, of course, academic. If the version of the Zhdanov doctrine now being put forth in the Faurisson affair were adopted by people with real power, it would not be the “Vietnam revisionists” who would be punished.

I do not want to leave the impression that the whole of the French press has been a theater of the absurd or committed to such views as those reviewed. There has been accurate com-

had appeared only in an earlier draft,” which I am accused of having illegitimately quoted. The example is, unfortunately, quite typical.

A number of critics (for example Abraham Forman of the Anti-Defamation League in *Le Matin*) contend that the only issue is Faurisson’s right to publish and that this has not been denied. The issue, however, is his suspension from the university because of threats of violence against him, and his court trial. It is of interest that his attorney, Yvon Chotard, who is defending him on grounds of freedom of expression and the right to an attorney of one’s choice, has been threatened with expulsion from the anti-Fascist organization that is bringing Faurisson to trial.

As Faye predicted, many showed themselves incapable of distinguishing between defense of the right of free expression and defense of the views expressed — and not only in France. In *The New Republic*, Martin Peretz concluded from my expressed lack of interest in Faurisson’s work that I am an “agnostic” about the holocaust and “a fool” about genocide. He claims further that I deny freedom of expression to my opponents, referring to my comment that one degrades oneself by entering into debate over certain issues. In short, if I refuse to debate you, I constrain your freedom. He is careful to conceal the example I cited: the holocaust.

Many writers find it scandalous that I should support the right of free expression for Faurisson without carefully analyzing his work, a strange doctrine which, if adopted, would effectively block defense of civil rights for unpopular views. Faurisson does not control the French press or scholarship. There is surely no lack of means or opportunity to refute or condemn his writings. My own views in sharp opposition to his are clearly on record, as I have said. No rational person will condemn a book, however outlandish its conclusions may seem, without at least reading it carefully; in this case, checking the documentation offered, and so on. One of the most bizarre crit-

icisms has been that by refusing to undertake this task, I reveal that I have no interest in six million murdered Jews, a criticism which, if valid, applies to everyone who shares my lack of interest in examining Faurisson's work. One who defends the right of free expression incurs no special responsibility to study or even be acquainted with the views expressed. I have, for example, frequently gone well beyond signing petitions in support of East European dissidents subjected to repression or threats, often knowing little and caring less about their views (which in some cases I find obnoxious, a matter of complete irrelevance that I never mention in this connection). I recall no criticism of this stand.

The latter point merits further comment. I have taken far more controversial stands than this in support of civil liberties and academic freedom. At the height of the Vietnam War, I publicly took the stand that people I regard as authentic war criminals should not be denied the right to teach on political or ideological grounds, and I have always taken the same stand with regard to scientists who "prove" that blacks are genetically inferior, in a country where their history is hardly pleasant, and where such views will be used by racists and neo-Nazis. Whatever one thinks of Faurisson, no one has accused him of being the architect of major war crimes or claiming that Jews are genetically inferior (though it is irrelevant to the civil-liberties issue, he writes of the "heroic insurrection of the Warsaw ghetto" and praises those who "fought courageously against Nazism" in "the right cause"). I even wrote in 1969 that it would be wrong to bar counterinsurgency research in the universities, though it was being used to murder and destroy, a position that I am not sure I could defend. What is interesting is that these far more controversial stands never aroused a peep of protest, which shows that the refusal to accept the right of free expression without retaliation, and the horror when others defend this right, is rather selective.

The reaction of the PEN Club in Paris is also interesting. PEN denounces my statements on the ground that they have given publicity to Faurisson's writing at a time when there is a resurgence of anti-Semitism. It is odd that an organization devoted to freedom of expression for authors should be exercised solely because Faurisson's defense against the charges brought against him is publicly heard. Furthermore, if publicity is being accorded to Faurisson, it is because he is being brought to trial (presumably, with the purpose of airing the issues) and because the press has chosen to create a scandal about my defense of his civil rights. On many occasions, I have written actual prefaces and endorsements for books in France — books that are unread and unknown, as indeed is the case generally with my own writings. The latter fact is illustrated, for example, by Thibaud, who claims that I advocated "confiding Vietnamese freedom to the supposed good will of the leaders of the North." In fact, my writings on the war were overwhelmingly devoted to the U.S. attack on the peasant society of the South (and later Laos and Cambodia as well), which aimed to undermine the neutralization proposals of the National Liberation Front and others and to destroy the rural society in which the NLF was based, and I precisely warned that success in this effort "will create a situation in which, indeed, North Vietnam will necessarily dominate Indochina, for no other viable society will remain."

Thibaud's ignorant falsifications point to one of the real factors that lie behind this affair. A number of these critics are ex-Stalinists, or people like Thibaud, who is capable of writing that prior to Solzhenitsyn, "every previous account" of "Sovietism" was within the Trotskyite framework (*Esprit*). Intellectuals who have recently awakened to the possibility of an anti-Leninist critique often systematically misunderstand a discussion of revolutionary movements and efforts to crush them that has never employed the assumptions they associate with the left. Thibaud, for example, cannot understand why I do not share his belief that Lenin, Stalin and Pol Pot demonstrate "the