"The Limits of Discourse" discussed

Earlier this month, Sam Harris - neuroscientist, philosopher, and opponent of religion - published an email exchange he had had with Noam Chomsky. He called it "The Limits of Discourse". During the conversation - which took place over four days in April - Harris makes a distinction between the ethics of killing, as carried out by radical Muslim organisations vs the United States (and its allies). Central to the conversation is the 1998 US bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, which was destroyed based upon the misapprehension that it was producing chemical weapons. Chomsky has argued that the destruction of the factory - which may have resulted in the deaths of many thousands of impoverished Sudanese who were relying on the medicines that were manufactured there - was an atrocity that shines a light on the total disregard the US political and military elite has for the lives of poor people in foreign countries. Discussing the Clinton administration - which ordered the bombing - he writes:

"[...] of course they knew there would be major casualties. They are not imbeciles, but rather adopt a stance that is arguably even more immoral than purposeful killing, which at least recognizes the human status of the victims, not just killing ants while walking down the street, who cares?"

Chomsky goes on to suggest - as many other commentators have done - that the missile strike was "retaliation" for the US embassy bombings in Tanzanya and Kenya earlier that year, carried out by Al-Qaeda.

Harris repeatedly returns to the intentions of the killers, writing:

"Here is my assumption about the al-Shifa case. I assume that Clinton believed it was, in fact, a chemical weapons factory - because I see no rational reason for him to have intentionally destroyed a pharmaceutical plant in retaliation for the embassy bombings."

Therefore, there is moral justification for the missile strike. The US government was acting in the interests of its own national security, based upon compelling intelligence it had received at the time. Fundamentally, the US was acting to *protect* life, whereas its enemies (read: Al-Qaeda) act to *destroy* life.

(Harris has used variations of this argument before - notably to defend Israel. Please follow this link for a discussion in a previous blog post on this very topic.)

What does this collision between Chomsky and Harris tell us about the views of these influential thinkers, on this significant topic of terrorism and state violence?

Firstly, it must be observed that the exchange is nowhere near as "fruitless" and "unproductive" as Harris claims it to be. Indeed, considering the degree to which both participants exposit the moral reasoning behind their arguments, it serves as a useful metric for weighing up the validity of these opposing views.

Central to the question of ethics in this area, is the tensions that arise between the following terms: "murder", "negligence" and "collateral damage". Staying with the example of Al-Shifa, Harris is arguing fairly unambiguously that the deaths resulting from

the strike were collateral damage, because they were the result of a justifiable (though tragically misconceived) military action. Chomsky has argued that the deaths were the result of negligence on the part of the Clinton administration, because it did not care enough about the possibility of civilian casualties to do the appropriate groundwork to discover what the true ramifications of the decision would be. He has also suggested that negligence on this scale may in fact be worse than murder, because it betrays an unwillingness on the part of the aggressor to even consider the human cost, suggesting that the very humanity of the Sudanese was unforgivably downgraded.

Chomsky refuses to be drawn into a more general inquiry about intentions, instead observing: "There is a lot to say about specific cases, like the al-Shifa bombing, and Japanese fascists in China." However, it could be argued that enough of these specific cases, taken as a whole, do paint a general picture. That is because the same justifications tend to be used again and again. Every military strike conducted by Israel, of course, is in the interests of its own national security. Palestinian casualties are caused by Hamas using its own people as human shields, by hiding its rockets in hospitals and residential buildings. It is never the fault of those who are unleashing these devastating weapons on civilian population centres.

Racial superiority is another recurring justification for inflicting misery on a collective of people. Such was the justification for Japanese imperial expansion during the Second World War and, it need hardly be said, that of the Nazis. And how much can we discount notions of our own racial superiority - as uncomfortable as that may be to face - as citizens of rich countries, for helping to ease the potential anguish of wiping out scores of foreigners in a variety of horrible ways?

It seems to me now - as it has done previously, whilst discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict - that it is profoundly dangerous, and intellectually lazy (if not intellectually dishonest), to award the fig leaf of moral decency to one organisation that kills and maims with high-powered explosives, whilst saving nothing but bile and hatred for other organisations that do the same thing, based upon assumptions made about the "intentions" of elites whose decision making will always be hidden from us. Why should anyone be expected to be so incredibly forgiving to the political leaders of western democracies who visit such bountiful packets of suffering upon innocent civilians, on the pretext of national security, when we all know that such people will always say whatever they are advised to say, based upon political expediency? Especially when we have ample evidence throughout history - but particularly recent history - that military action visited by powerful states on less powerful ones hardly ever seems to improve the situation on the ground, and cumulatively, creates a more dangerous world.

Considering the mental stimulation afforded to me by Harris's philosophical musings on religion, free will and the relationship of science to religion and morality, I continue to find his geopolitical ideas myopic and bizarrely ill-thought through. For a man of his undeniable intellect to reach such an apparent intellectual short-circuit is very hard to understand. However, I applaud his decision to approach and engage with an admittedly rather prickly-sounding Chomsky and to publish the resulting exchange, because it does help to inflame the debate - one that will only continue to gather in importance and urgency as tensions continue to rise between the west and its "enemies".

Please follow this link for the full email transcription between Noam Chomsky and Sam Harris:

http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/the-limits-of-discourse

May 2015