FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE AND THE DECLINE OF POSTMODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of postmodernism in the philosophy of the 20th century changed the evaluation of Friedrich Nietzsche fundamentally. His voluntarism – subjectivism, perspectivism and moral nihilism – appealed to a philosophy that rejected the analytical approach after the Frege-Russell legacy. Living in a Saussure world of webs of words, only de-construction could harness theoretical chaos. However, Nietzsche’s theory of social stratification sits very badly with postmodernism. Maybe the new humanitarianism in the making will reduce the admiration for him?

Keywords: Nietzsche, postmodernism, liberal egalitarianism, compassion, humanity

INTRODUCTION

Nietzsche’s star as philosopher and cultural critique stands in zenith. With the post-modernist revolution in the humanities and social sciences, he has become an idol for a large set of leading personalities, from the existentialists, over the post-structuralists to philosophers or science as well as morals. But how about his endorsement of aristocratic values and segmented social stratification? This tenet by Nietzsche does not sit well with the prevailing ideas today among postmodernists. Is there a real incoherence? The entry on him in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy shows that postmodernism has been conducive to a fundamental re-evaluation of his multifaceted message. As the literature on Nietzsche grows every year, his anticipation of subjectivism, perspectivism and secularism is more and more the centre of the comments and research in humanities and social sciences. Nietzsche had a set of tenets that he repeated in book after book, with some variation and perhaps also contradictions. One of these theses is the complete acceptance of social stratification, especially its moral implications. This is hardly the Nietzsche that post-modernists praise for his individualism, subjectivism and perspectivism. Post-modernism is in its political entailment egalitarian, but Nietzsche rejects this stance forcefully. In this paper I will analyse his aristocratism, which goes against postmodernism.

Nietzsche and Postmodernism

The reputation of Nietzsche during the twentieth century shifted from weekly negative to strongly positive with the subsequent rise of postmodernism. When he finished publishing, the so-called revolution in philosophy was under way, i.e. the rise of analytical philosophy along the Frege-Russell approach, underlying logic and semantics. Nietzsche did not at all fit into this movement or set of movements (Cambridge, Oxford, Vienna and Uppsala as well as Harvard) that came to dominate philosophy in the first half of the 20th century. It is his individualism, existentialism, perspectivism and expressionism that have caught the attention of great postmodernists, like e.g. Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze and Sartre as well as Rorty and Feyerabend. Instead, the legacy of Nietzsche faced an upward struggle to disassociate itself from the emerging fascism. Nietzsche was said to be a forerunner of racism and anti-intellectualism in the inter-war Europe, a doctrine exploited by the German Nazis with help from his sister who had manipulated his late publications when he was mad. Analysing Nietzsche’s stance towards aristocracy and social stratification makes one realises that he would not have supported the German thugs, as his ideal was none other than Goethe and his contempt for “herds” limitless.

The emergence of postmodernism after the Second World War changed all of this, as postmodernists sought inspiration in inter alia Nietzsche for their credos:

Complexity: reality is not easily captured by abstract words or concepts, as a theory is a kind of discourse, comprising “stories” that are inter-connected in huge word webs that must be de-constructed into simpler forms, or more concrete visions;

Contradiction: webs of hypotheses are not coherent, as dif-
frenter story telling is always possible; one must allow for mul-
tiple presentations of facts;
- Ambiguity of words is systematically ambiguous and
opaque, so that any notion of truthful representation is out of
the question; facts and interpretations are inter-connected; all
words are theory loaded;
- Diversity: Absolute truth is a misnomer, as alternative
story telling is always feasible and the variety of inter-
pretations sustains an intellectual chaos that can only be de-
constructed into its basic components, or stories or projects;
rigour may actually be an obstacle to scientific progress or in-
tellectual insights;
- Power: real life and its power structures permeate all story-
telling and words are not neutral in its social consequences; in-
stead economic power is vested in the projects scholars engage in,
which calls for an examination of the inter-connections be-
tween the representation of the world and theory construction;
story telling serves social purposes.

Nietzsche anticipated lots of these theses in his voluntarist
approach to philosophy, epistemology, ontology and morality.
With the now declining trend for postmodernists’ philosophy,
one may ask whether Nietzsche’s star will also fade. The new
global trend underlines he basic interests of mankind – hu-
manity, peace, equality, feminism, rights, compassion – that
Nietzsche rejected in favour of the values of aristocracy. Will he
perhaps go out of data?

Nietzsche’s Texts
Due to his illness, Nietzsche could only benefit from a short
period of creativity, from his first book in 1872 to his final
collapse in 1889. However, he was extremely productive with
almost 10 books or booklets. The last publications, edited by
his sister, cannot be taken into consideration. His style of writ-
ing became more and more based upon the aphorism model,
sometimes very short and sometimes quite long. His manner
of writing became more uncompromising, if not drastic, the
more damage and suffering his illness caused him.

There is logic in the succession of books or booklets,
namely a set of key themes with connected theses propagated
by Nietzsche. To capture the themes and the corresponding
tenets, one must take into consideration the whole set of books
and booklets, following how he treats the themes and formu-
lates his tenets. One should not include books where authen-
ticity is problematic, published after his madness, or works
that are more poetic in nature than discursive, like Also Sprach
Zarathustra. We know in reality nothings about the man un-
der this name, when he lived or what he preached. In is all a
display of Nietzsche’s mastery of German language.

Here, we document first his endorsement of aristocracy and
social stratification.

Social Strata and Morality
All known human societies have been stratified somehow with
higher and lower strata identified in accordance with a set of
criteria. Whatever the mechanisms of selection have been, so-
cial stratification results in a distribution of wealth and power.
The two basic explanations are:

Functionalism (David and Moore, 19455): From the per-
spective of the market economy, social stratification fulfils so-
called “functional imperatives”, allocating rewards according
to merit, enhancing overall social and economic efficiency.
Differential achievements must be rewarded to maintain in-
terests to performance.

Marxism: The class society of the bourgeoisie with its big
classes and numerous strata according to income, wealth and
prestige and power is based upon exploitation and will be abol-
ished in time after the necessary revolution. To these two al-
ternaive approaches, we now add Nietzsche’s moral theory of
stratification. In Beyond Good and Evil (1886), we read a full
stamen of his theory of stratification of societies:

“All enhancement so far in the type “man” has been the
work of an aristocratic society – and that is how it will be,
again and again, since this sort of society believes in a long
ladder of rank order and value distinctions between men, and
in some sense needs slavery. “ (Nietzsche, 2000: 151) Ni-
etzsche is seen as the father of moral nihilism, but beyond
Christian good and evil there is to him a set of absolute values,
which he calls “noble”. Noble values, or the valuation of the
nobility must be uphold in every society, whatever thee costs,
because they substantiate the essence of men and women.
We quote again: “Without the pathos of distance as it grows out of
the ingrained differences between stations, out of the way the
ruling caste maintains an overview and keeps looking down
on subservient types and tools, and out of this caste’s equally
continuous exercise in obeying and commanding, in keeping
away and below – without this pathos, that other, more myste-
rious pathos could not have grown at all, that demand for new
expansions of distance within the soul itself, the development
of states that are increasingly high, rare, distant, tautly drawn
and comprehensive, and in short, the enhancement of the type
“man,” the constant “self-overcoming of man” (to use amoral
formula in a supra-moral sense). (Nietzsche, 2000: 151)

The rationale of social stratification is not rewarding self-interests
to achieve Pareto-optimality or exploit weaker strata for ego-
istic interests, but – says Nietzsche in the same section: “Its
fundamental belief must always be that society cannot exist
for the sake of society, but only as the substructure and frame-
work for raising an exceptional type of being up to its higher
Nietzsche endorses all forms of social stratification throughout history, even slavery and serfdom, because such rules institutionalise his moral values beyond good and evil. The lower strata have to support the higher strata due to a basic moral rationale, i.e. society is for the benefits of the noble type of person because they and only they create value: “The noble type of person feels that he determines value, he does not need anyone’s approval, he judges that “what is harmful to me is harmful in itself,” he knows that he is the one who gives honour to things in the first place, he creates values. He honours everything he sees in himself: this sort of morality is self-glorifying. In the foreground, there is the feeling of fullness, of power that wants to overflow, the happiness associated with a high state of tension, the consciousness of a wealth that wants to make gifts and give away.” (Nietzsche, 2000:154) This section on the “aristocratic society” is the longest elaboration of his theory of social stratification as based on morality. Its essence is though repeated in every book or booklet Nietzsche published. In Human, all too Human (1880-86), we read: Culture and caste. - A higher culture can come into existence only where there are two different castes in society: that of the workers and that of the idle, of those capable of true leisure; or, expressed more vigorously: the caste compelled to work and the caste that works if it wants to. Differences in good fortune and happiness are not the essential element when it comes to the production of a higher culture; in any event, however, the caste of the idle is the more capable of suffering and suffers more, its enjoyment of existence is less, its task heavier. If an exchange between these two castes should take place, moreover, so that more obtuse, less spiritual families and individuals are demoted from the higher to the lower caste and the more liberated in the latter obtain entry into the higher, then a state is attained beyond which there can be seen only the open sea of indeterminate desires. - Thus speaks to us the fading voice of ages past; but where are there still ears to hear it? (Nietzsche, 1996: 161)

This theory is completely unacceptable for postmodernists, as they would call for a de-construction of the “noble” values and “aristocracy” – the rule of aristos = the best: Qui bono?

**Implications of Aristocratic Values**

We will spell out what is entailed in an “aristocratic society” by looking at the subsequent values that Nietzsche propagates throughout his scholarship.

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**Rejection of compassion**

Globalisation fosters awareness of compassion. With many million poor and handicapped, compassion appears completely legitimate. There is a global conscience about the terrible fate of the new persons in slavery, the trafficking of children and the premature death from starvation of the children in Muslim countries. This ideal of compassion is to be found in the theory of liberal egalitarianism, which is represented by several moral philosophers: Rawls (1971), Dworkin (2000), Barry (1995) and Sen (2009):

- Compassion for individual choice, endorsing the liberty of the person;
- Compassion for impartiality between individuals whatever group they belong to.

E.g. Nietzsche endorsed the Indian caste system, now forbidden in the modern constitution of the county. Untouchables have been recruited for highest offices. The castevaluations may still plague India informally, but compassion has considerably reduced its relevance and acceptability. Yet, Nietzsche did not hesitate to write in the booklet The Twilight of Idols (1888): Let us take the other case of so-called morality, the breeding of a particular race or type. The most magnificent example can be found in Indian morality, where it is given religious sanction as the 'law of Manu’. This law sets the task of breeding no fewer than four races at once: a priestly race, a warrior race, a merchant and agricultural race, and finally a servant race, the Sudras. Clearly, we are not talking about taming animals any more: even to conceive of a breeding scheme like this presupposes a type of person who is a hundred times gentler and more reasonable. You breathe freely again when you leave the Christian atmosphere of disease and dungeon and enter this healthier, higher, more expansive world. What a miserable book the New Testament is in comparison with Manu, how bad it smells! (Nietzsche, 2005: 184)

Here, we encounter the so-called “Arian myth”, which evidently Nietzsche believed in, although now discarded entirely; and he brings out his theory of Judaism and Christianity as the moral revolt against the strong and noble, i.e. no compassion with the “chandalas” and their suffering due to the custom or Institutions of Manu: “… These decrees are instructive enough: they present us with Aryan humanity for once, in its pure and primordial form, - we learn that the concept of ‘pure blood’ is anything but harmless. On the other hand, it is clear which people represent the eternal hatred, the Chandala-hatred of this ‘humanity’, where this hatred has become a religion, where it has become genius . . .” (Nietzsche, 2005: 185)
Rebuttal of Socialism and Liberalism

Nietzsche deals with compassion when discussing socialism as well as liberalism and their moral foundations in Human, all too Human (1880-86) - one of his biggest books, examining lots of aspects of morality. I will make one quotation: "Genius incompatible with the ideal state. - The Socialists desire to create a comfortable life for as many as possible. If the enduring homeland of this comfortable life, the perfect state, were really to be attained, then this comfortable life would destroy the soil out of which great intellect and the powerful individual in general grows: by which I mean great energy. If this state is achieved mankind would have become too feeble still to be able to produce the genius. Ought one therefore not to desire that life should retain its violent character and savage forces and energies continue to be called up again and again? (Nietzsche, 1996: 112)

Nietzsche succeeds in this passage to reject both classical liberalism (Bentham’s formula “Greatest happiness principle”) and socialism that focuses upon the state. Both these ideologies are self-destructive. It is difficult to agree with this separation between intelligence and a warm heart. For Nietzsche, the state has other objectives than the overall welfare of its citizens. Perhaps “the greatest intellect” needs democratic control of the by the poor intellectuals?!

Interestingly, Nietzsche rejects all forms of state dominance in society, which would include not only Communism but also National Socialism: “Socialism can serve to teach, in a truly brutal and impressive fashion, what danger there lies in all accumulations of state power, and to that extent to implant mistrust of the state itself. When its harsh voice takes up the watchword: ‘as much state as possible’ it thereby at first sounds noisier than ever: but soon the opposite cry comes through with all the greater force: ‘as little state as possible’.” (Nietzsche, 1996: 174) Modern social structure has broken down each and every caste society, completely delegitimized by modernisation as well as post-modernisation. Democracy calls all to the election boxes, and the market economy rewards who ever display the necessary skills, at least in general. However, also the unfortunate have rights, i.e. can legitimately claim support, assistance and sympathy.

Adoration of great men

The key words with Nietzsche are emancipation, self-realization and expressiveness. Nietzsche’s originality is no doubt his subjectivism in a period when the dominant philosophy was positivist, underlining objectivity; this makes him a major forerunner to the post-modernist revolution after the Second World War as well as with Dane Kierkegaard a source of inspiration for existentialism. But he failed miserably with regard to the concept of equality and its increasing value for humanity.

One of his favourites was the Roman dictator G.J. Caesar:

“The means by which Julius Caesar defended himself against sickliness and headaches: tremendous marches, the most frugal way of life, uninterrupted sojourn in the open air, continuous exertion—these are, in general, the universal rules of preservation and protection against the extreme vulnerability of that subtle machine, working under the highest pressure, which we call genius.” (Nietzsche, 2005: 207) and Nietzsche’s ideal society with a proper social stratification was the Roman Republic and its Empire: What stood as aere perennius, the imperium Romanum, the most magnificent form of organization ever to be achieved under difficult conditions, compared to which everything before or after has just been patched together, botched and diletantish, those holy anarchists made a ‘piety’ out of destroying ‘the world’, which is to say the imperium Romanum, until every stone was overturned, - until even the Germans and other thugs could rule over it . . . The Christian and the anarchist: both are decadents, neither one can do anything except dissolve, poison, lay waste, bleed dry, both have instincts of mortal hatred against everything that stands, that stands tall, that has endurance, that promises life a future . This organization was stable enough to hold up under bad emperors: the accident of personalities cannot make any difference with things like this, - first principle of all great architecture. (Nietzsche, 2006: 60-62) Nietzsche’s endorsement of the Roman civilization as one of the truly great ones stems from his admiration of Roman society and its social stratification, based upon the instruments of force and power such as: the legions, its law and institutions, grand scale infrastructure and architecture, massive slavery, domination of other peoples and the relentless employment of physical violence. During the Republic, government was highly institutionalized, whereas the Empire was characterized by increasing arbitrariness, ending in oriental despotism like government. The use and abuse of power occurred frequently the Republic, while it became daily concern under the Empire. During the Republic, the neighbouring peoples were subjugated or enslaved in a long series of war, besides the occurrence of civil wars within Rome. The Empire brought about huge extension of empire territory, opening it up for constant incursions of so-called barbarians. Sometimes the Empire was governed by insane emperors, resulting in turmoil and civil war. The larger the territory of Rome, the more violent conflicts became. Defensive war or offensive ones were conducive to making Rome a garrison state. The army became the first priority of the state: how to feed it, how to control it, and how to pay the soldiers during
and after combat? Mutiny was frequent, as the army always wanted extra money. It sometimes appointed the Emperor. As the wars become more frequent, getting more soldiers was so urgent that also barbarians could be enrolled. Enormous undertakings to construct fortresses to shield off the borders from outsiders were done at high costs but will no permanent positive results. In sum, Rome was a martial republic or empire with a dire social stratification, over 40 per cent of its population being slaves. Rome was also Colosseum and its enormous undertakings in various gaming. Where ever the Romans settle down, they established the business of gladiators and beats killing humans. It was an enterprise of gigantic scale, especially when Christians were persecuted. “Panem et circences” constituted the chief concerns of Romans, who did not participate in the war machine. Bread and circus, said Roman satirist Juvenal, were the gifts to the weaker or poorer strata. Lots of animals were imported monthly from Africa. Nietzsche’s hero, the “noble” Caesar represented this civilization to 100 per cent. His war against Gaul brought him numerous slaves from each tribe to sell to Rome, providing him with a huge fortune to use for bribery and his army. Gaul suffered a heavy decline in population as a result of Caesar’s conquest. But the Roman Republic could not be saved from Caesar’s march to Rome and he contributed to the creation of the Roman Imperator during the principate.

**Contradictio in adiecto: amor fati, eternal recurrence and will to power**

Based upon his theory of social stratification, Nietzsche taught that human beings have to put up with their position in society, be it high or low. He actually adhered to determinism, rejecting the notion of free will. Employing the strange Indian notion of eternal recurrence, the lower strata could only hope for an improvement in the next life, enduring their hardships magnanimously – amor fati. However, this social determinism cannot be congruent with his doctrine of the will to power as the fundamental drive of human beings. It presupposes choice and mistake, as voluntarism entails free will. Men and women can alter social structure by policy-making, enhancing social justice, e.g. in accordance with liberal egalitarianism.

**CONCLUSION**

Nietzsche had a well of ideas that he returned to in his books and booklets, not always coherently. His reputation has been much enlarged with post-modernism, as a very early spokesman for subjectivity and human autonomy against prevailing dominant culture. Yet, his theory of social stratification is unacceptable and completely out of tune with both post-modernism and what comes after, namely humanitarianism. With neo-liberalism discarded and socialism in lack of a credible economic system theory, the morality of compassion takes centre stage. The unlucky are so numerous in the globalization era: asylum seekers, refugees, Syria’s and Yemen’s children, undernourishment in Africa, the Rohingyas, the homeless in the rich world, the eco-refugees, etc. Compassion will not threaten the ruling classes or the capitalist system. We can double UN money for achieving compassion for children, starving peasants and handicapped. Compassion implies liberal egalitarianism as social justice, but it also believes in the market economy as the most effective allocation mechanism.

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