One hundred years since the death of Friedrich Nietzsche: a review of his ideas and influence—Part 1

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The following is the first of a three-part series. The remaining parts will be posted over the next two days.

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"'Progress' is a modern idea, which is to say it is a false idea."—Nietzsche's The Anti-Christ*, 1888*

"There is altogether no prouder and at the same time more exquisite kind of book than my books—they attain here and there the highest thing which can be obtained on earth: cynicism."—Nietzsche's Ecce Homo*, 1888*

August 25, 2000 marked the hundredth anniversary of the death of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. As part of the Nietzsche centennial year in Germany there have been a number of new books on Nietzsche as well as exhibitions and lectures in the east German town of Weimar, which is host to a permanent Nietzsche exhibition. Two plays dealing with Nietzsche have been produced in Berlin with more on the way. A host of articles and commemorations have appeared in German papers and plans have been made for a Nietzsche stamp edition.

One of the plays put on a short time ago in Berlin portrayed Nietzsche as a sort of eccentric Epicurean figure who despised all Germans and loved Italy and good food. A recently published pictorial biography (translated from English) quotes Nietzsche prominently on its cover as a "good European". Professional philosophers contributing to a recent radio programme dedicated to Nietzsche on the BBC praised his contribution to philosophy and declared it was preposterous to suggest any common ground between Nietzsche and German reactionary political movements, including fascism.

For some time now Nietzsche's work has occupied a prominent place in French universities and he is regarded by many "post-modernist" thinkers as the most influential philosopher of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Germany his thought played a leading role in the post-war evolution of the influential Frankfurt School of Social Research.

How is Nietzsche's appeal to different spectrums of political thought in the twentieth century to be explained? The anniversary of his death provides an opportunity to review his work and career and address the issue of why Nietzsche's work has such a powerful grip on modern-day schools of thought. This, the first of three articles, will briefly review the development of his thought and career. Two further articles will deal with the reception of Nietzsche's ideas by intellectuals and movements of both the right and the left.

Nietzsche's career

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (named after the reigning king of Prussia) was born on October 15, 1844 in the village of Röcken, near Lützen in Prussian Saxony (now the east German state of Sachsen-Anhalt). His father was the village pastor and himself the son of a pastor. His mother Franziska was the daughter of the pastor of the nearby village of Pobles. Following a fall, Friedrich's father died of encephalomalacia (softening of the brain) when the boy was just five. A year later the family, which consisted of Friedrich, his paternal grandmother, his sister and two maiden aunts, had to leave the parsonage and moved to Naumberg in the east German state of Thuringia.[1]

Regarded as a gifted pupil at the age of 14, Nietzsche won a free place to one of the best schools in the state. The rector of the school was a supporter of the revival of liberalism, which he regarded as a combination of the ideal of *Bildung* (education aimed at the encouragement of individual growth) and the sort of cultural nationalism associated with the figure of Johann Gottfried Herder. Nietzsche excelled at classical studies and was keenly interested in literary trends and music. He heard his first Wagner in 1861, but his favourite composer at this time was Schumann. At the age of 20 Nietzsche took up studies in theology and philology at the University of Bonn.

In 1865 Nietzsche declared his loss of faith in the Christian religion and broke off his studies. In the same year he acquired a copy of pessimist philosopher Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and promptly declared his conversion to Schopenhauer's thought. During the same period Nietzsche made his first and only direct intervention into politics. Although initially hostile to Prussia's war with Austria, in 1866 he soon joined in the wave of patriotism which enveloped Prussia and neighbouring German states as Bismarck recorded one military victory after the other. Nietzsche associated himself with a small group of Bismarckian liberals under the leadership of Heinrich von Treitschke who called for the annexation of Saxony by Prussia.

In 1868 Nietzsche met Richard Wagner for the first time and discovered that the composer shared his own enthusiasm for Schopenhauer. In 1869, at the age of 24, Nietzsche was appointed to the chair of classical philology at Basel and as teacher of Greek at the associated grammar school. His position as professor prevented him from actively fighting in the German-French war as a soldier. Nevertheless, he obtained leave to serve as a medical orderly with the Prussian army on August 11, 1870. Within the space of a month, after briefly experiencing the appalling conditions in the trenches, he contracted dysentery and diphtheria and was forced to return to Basel.

Nietzsche always had frail health and was to suffer his entire life from extremely bad eyesight, intense headaches and periods of exhaustion. There is extensive medical evidence to indicate that Nietzsche's prolonged ill-health as an adult, as well as his final collapse and descent into insanity, were the consequences of syphilis which he contracted as a student in a visit to a brothel. In 1871 he was forced to take a leave of absence from work on medical grounds. He began writing his first work to be published— *The Birth of Tragedy.*

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The experience of German unification in 1871 was a source of profound disappointment for Nietzsche. Increasingly toward the end of the 1870s and during the 1880s he expressed his bitter disillusionment with the Bismarkian project. As we shall see, his disenchantment with German reunification was to express itself powerfully in his later work. At the same time, in 1871, Nietzsche was following the developments in France very closely. He was initially dismayed at the emergence of the Paris Commune and thoroughly alarmed at the possibility of any sort of take-over by the working class. In correspondence he graphically communicated his sense of relief at the eventual bloody suppression of the Communards.

A few years later, in 1875, the General German Workers Association united with the Social Democratic Workers Party at the renowned Gotha conference of 1875 to found a new Marxist party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was to win mass influence amongst German workers in the space of a few decades. The rapid political polarisation of classes which took place in Germany in the 1870s and '80s was, as we shall later see, graphically reflected in the work of Nietzsche.

In 1874, following a violent argument, Nietzsche distanced himself from Wagner. He also declared his growing dissatisfaction with his philosophical mentor Schopenhauer. Over the next years Nietzsche's health deteriorated rapidly and he travelled about Europe in association with various cures prescribed for him. When his numerous complaints permitted he continued to write.

In 1879 he was retired from the university of Basel on health grounds, receiving a pension which allowed him to continue writing. For the next 10 years Nietzsche was racked by illness which precipitated a string of breakdowns. In 1889 Nietzsche collapsed in the square of Turin, after having rushed to the defence of a horse being whipped by its owner. Upon recovering from his fit he was no longer sane and he spent the last decade of his life mentally incompetent in the care of his mother and sister.

Social and political background

Reading Nietzsche's work today one is immediately struck, particularly in his early works, by his continual references to some of the outstanding figures of the European Enlightenment. His work *Human, All too Human* (1878), for example, begins with a quote from the great French rationalist philosopher Descartes. On various occasions Nietzsche proclaims his debt of gratitude to other great figures of enlightenment thought such as Voltaire and Spinoza as well as the outstanding representatives of the *Sturm und Drang* movement and German romanticism—Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and in the manner of both Goethe and Schiller, Nietzsche speculates on the meaning of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

In fact it is impossible to understand Nietzsche's work and development without examining political developments in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. A year before his father's death in 1848, when Nietzsche was just four, Europe and the multitude of individual states which we now know as Germany were racked by revolution.

Tucked away in their east German village it is unlikely that the Nietzsche family were conscious of what had taken place. Nevertheless the reversal of the revolutionary wave of 1848, due in particular in Germany to the weakness of the rising German bourgeoisie intimidated by the radicalism of the emerging working class, was to have profound repercussions for a generation of young revolutionaries and intellectuals.[2] One of Nietzsche's mentors, the young Richard Wagner, fought on the barricades in 1848 against the forces of reaction only later to embrace mystical nationalism and virulent anti-Semitism.

The year 1848 not only marked a collapse of the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, it also ushered in a profound collapse of clerical authority and organised religion which was broadly regarded as having supported the old status quo. A wave of disaffection, in particular amongst Protestants, led many to quit religion. One biographer of Nietzsche writes of the pressures confronting believers of his generation. “Secularisation threatened to leave them displaced and rootless, yet enticed them forward with the alternative of a post-religious identity as the first of the “new men” (quoted in P. Bergmann, *Nietzsche. “The Last Anti-Political German*”).

Writing on the general social climate just over a decade later in 1860 the French commentator Charles de Rusat stated: “Pessimism has made great progress in recent times.” He added that many Frenchmen, who 30 or 40 years earlier had been full of hope and enthusiasm for the principles of the Revolution, had now come to the conclusion that modern democracy was of no more than “turbulent decadence”. The philosophy of pessimism found its most prominent representative in Germany in the figure of Alfred Schopenhauer.

In the process of deepening social radicalism after 1848, the best products of the German intelligentsia were drawn towards the philosophy of Hegel and its materialist reworking at the hands of Marx and Engels. Nietzsche, however, represents a wing of the German intelligentsia, schooled in the classics and German romanticism, which languished in the backwaters of political stagnation after 1848. Intensely antagonistic to the consequences arising from the foundation of a united Germany, Nietzsche turned increasingly to the right, succumbing to the noxious fumes of cultural elitism, the mystical elements of German *Lebensphilosophie* and the newly emerging pseudo-science of eugenics.[3]

Nietzsche has a reputation as a difficult philosopher to study. German philosopher Karl Jaspers stated that Nietzsche gives the impression of having “two opinions about everything”. A number of the difficulties which arise from reading Nietzsche's work are the inevitable product of his own ideology, which elevates metaphorical pronouncements and allegories above systematic scientific thought while favouring “style” in place of content.[4]

At the same time there is a definite progression to be detected in his work. In the early and middle period of his life, up until the late 1870s, strains of psychological insight can be found in his work as he attempts to grapple with the profound social changes taking place around him. His vehement attacks on the hypocrisy of the church and his writings on the cultural upheaval of the times was to later influence such prominent figures as the German writers Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse.

By the beginning of the 1880s, however, and as Nietzsche abandoned any remaining hopes for Bismarkian Germany, his work is overtaken by rancour and contempt for the broad masses of humanity. He ends his life as an apostle of cynicism. Despite vicissitudes there is, nevertheless, a very consistent core to Nietzsche's development. In his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the threads of Nietzsche's standpoint on a number of issues are already very evident.

Nietzsche's views on culture, science and history

The juxtaposition of art and culture (in particular music, tragic drama and poetry) to science is a recurring motif in Nietzsche's work. His measure of a society is the extent to which it has developed its art and culture. At the same time he rejects any definite relation between art and life in terms of content and defines culture in terms of style: “Culture is, above all, unity of style in all expressions of the life of a people”(*The Birth of Tragedy*).

Reflecting in 1888 on the significance of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche wrote: “The relation between art and truth is the first one I reflected on. Even today their enmity fills me with a sacred dread. My first book was devoted to this fact; *The Birth of Tragedy* believes in art, within the background, another belief, that we cannot live with the truth; that the will to know the true is already a symptom of degeneracy” *(Nietzsches werke—Kröner*, XIV, 3, p. 239). Art for Nietzsche not only excludes, *it must exclude*, the possibility of truth: “Art in the service of illusion—that is our cult” (ibid., XII, p. 89).

At the same time he declares that the search for truth through science is

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illusory. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he advocates the elements of instinct and myth-making associated with the classical Greek figure of Dionysus. Nietzsche takes issue with the Greek philosopher Socrates, whom he regards as the classical representative of rational thought and the "will to know": "there is a profound illusion which first entered the world in the person of Socrates—the unshakeable belief that rational thought, guided by causality, can penetrate to the depths of being and that it is capable not only of knowing but even of correcting being. This is a sublime metaphysical illusion."

The second half of the nineteenth century in Europe was a period of enormous development in the fields of science and productive technique. Revolutionary new inventions were transforming the forms of production. Theories such as Darwin's theory of evolution and new discoveries in the fields of physics, chemistry and medicine were undermining long established attitudes and prejudices. Speaking of general contemporary social moods expressing confidence in the ability of science to improve life, Nietzsche writes in his collection of essays *Untimely Meditations* (1874): "There is indeed, rejoicing that now 'science is beginning to dominate life': that condition may, possibly, be attained; but life thus dominated is not of much value because it is far less *living* and guarantees far less life for the future than did a former life dominated not by knowledge but by instinct and powerful illusions."

The defect of science, according to Nietzsche, is that it leaves no room for the essential human drives and desires for myth and illusion. Instinct is more powerful than any scientific method. In the essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (in *Untimely Meditations*) Nietzsche also takes issue with the powerful tradition of historical research above all associated with the name of Hegel. Declaiming Hegel's strivings to establish a thorough-going systematic approach to history, Nietzsche articulates his opposition to "that admiration for the power of history which in practice transforms every moment into a naked admiration for success and leads to an idolatry of the factual." As we shall see in the third article of this series, French theorists in the second half of the twentieth century (post-structuralists and post-modernists) made particular use of Nietzsche's antipathy to Hegel and history.

Cultural elitism

At the same time, Nietzsche's conception of culture and learning is elitist to the core—he is convinced that knowledge and study must be the privilege of the few. He vigorously opposes, on principle, any form of universal education, which he refers to as a state of "barbarism".

In 1871, fired by what he saw as the dangers arising from the Paris Commune and perturbed at the growth of social democracy in Germany itself, he warned that universal education could lead to communism: "The dissemination of culture is but a phase preparatory to communism. In this way, culture becomes weaker to the extent that it can no longer confer any privilege. The widest dissemination of culture, that is to say barbarism, is quite precisely the preliminary condition for communism. Generalised culture transforms itself into hatred of true culture" (*Untimely Meditations*). In his later work *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-84) he writes: "That everyone is allowed to learn to read at length spoils not only writing but also thinking."

For Nietzsche communism and the dissemination of culture amongst the broad masses meant the end of culture. His preferred social order for the preservation of art was a slave-type of society: "In order that there may be a broad, deep and fruitful soil for the development of art, the enormous majority must, in the service of a minority, be slavishly subjected to life's struggle, to a greater degree than their own wants necessitate" (*Writings on the Greek State*).

Nietzsche's views on politics and society

As we have seen, Nietzsche's prescription for a healthy culture was the cultivation of an elite based on a society divided by rank. For a time after 1871 Nietzsche retained considerable hopes in Bismarck's united Germany. During this period, as a new Germany was consolidating itself inside Europe, a tone of moderation is detectable in his work. He wrote opposing virulent forms of nationalism and proclaimed the ideal of the "good European" working actively for the "amalgamation of nations". But above all Nietzsche looked to Bismarck as a bulwark against socialism.

In a revealing passage in *The Wanderer and his Shadow* (1880) Nietzsche throws his weight behind a reformist-type scheme to banish the bogey of socialism through a form of progressive taxation: "As socialism is a doctrine that the acquisition of property ought to be abolished, the people are as alienated from it as they could be. And once they have got the power of taxation into their hands through the great parliamentary majorities they will assail the capitalists, the merchants and the princes of the stock exchange with a progressive tax and slowly create a middle class which will be in a position to *forget* socialism like an illness from which it has recovered."

Bismarck has traditionally been celebrated as politician for his pragmatist combination of *Zuckerbrot und Peitsche* (sweetbread and the whip). Nietzsche was dismayed by Bismarck's *Zuckerbrot* —his concessions to the masses which encouraged democratic sentiments—as well as the unabashed greed of the newly emerging German capitalist class. He deplored the subordination of culture to the new Moloch capital: "the educated classes and states are being swept along by a huge contemptible money economy.... Nowadays the crudest and most evil forces, the egoism of the money makers and the military despots, hold sway over almost everything on earth" (*Untimely Meditations*).

In notes for one of his last works Nietzsche articulates his alternative to the threat of socialism on the one hand and a society based on the mere acquisition of wealth on the other. He calls for the introduction of a strict order of rank to ensure the domination of a governing aristocratic elite—his favoured social order: *slavery*.

"In this age of *suffrage universel*, i.e., when everyone may sit in judgement on everyone and everything, I feel impelled to re-establish *order of rank* .... Though it is true that the Greeks perished through slavery, it is even more certain that we shall perish from no longer having slavery.... What a comfort it is to think upon the serf of the Middle Ages, with the vigorous and delicate legal and moral relations that united him with his lord, in the narrowness so rich with sense of his limited existence" (notes to *The Will to Power 1888*). And in the same vein: "Slavery must not be abolished; it is necessity. We only need to see to it that the men emerge *for whom* one will work."[4]

The essays written by Nietzsche in the last five years of his sane life are suffused with contempt for the broad masses of humanity, Malthusian diatribes against equality and "inferior" humanity, hymns of praise to militarism and the merits of war together with his advocacy of the "new man"—the *Übermensch* (the over-man or superman). According to Nietzsche, slavery and exploitation corresponded to the natural state of affairs: "Hatred, the mischievous delight in the misfortune of others, the lust to rob and dominate and whatever else is called evil belongs to the most amazing economy of the preservation of the species" (*The Gay Science*, 1882).

Nietzsche has only contempt for broad masses of the population which he denotes as mere "rabble". A chapter of his *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is dedicated to "the rabble", and he writes: "Life is a fountain of delight, but where the rabble also drinks all wells are poisoned" (*Of the Rabble*).

From this brief treatment of Nietzsche's work it is possible to discern some of the main elements of his thought and the particular interests they reflected. Two souls appear to beat in his breast: on the one hand the petty-bourgeois artist or *Kunstler* (Nietzsche's own attempts to compose music proved fruitless), thoroughly frustrated by the progressive development of society, science and the dissemination of knowledge; the artist who cries "halt" , only to propose a thoroughly elitist cultural alternative based on

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illusion, myth and instinct. On the other hand, in his assault against the “contemptible money economy” and advocacy of a society based strictly on rank, Nietzsche most clearly articulates the interests of the German Junker—aristocratic and feudal layers who saw their traditional standing under threat from the new social order.

Nietzsche also undoubtedly shares one further vital characteristic of the German liberal intelligentsia which disgraced itself in 1848. Despite the radicalism of his language: his proclamation of the “death of God”, his intention to make “philosophy with a hammer” and his volleys against “contemptible money”, Nietzsche was a determined opponent of revolution: “The experiences of history have taught us, unfortunately, that every such revolution brings about the resurrection of the most savage energies in the shape of the long-buried dreadfulness and excesses of the most distant ages.... It is not Voltaire's moderate nature, inclined as it was to ordering, purifying, and reconstructing, but Rousseau's passionate follies and half-lies that called forth the optimistic spirit of the Revolution against which I cry: ‘Ecrasez L'infame!’” (*Human, All too Human*).

Nietzsche's dismissal of revolution and fear of the working class meant that his radicalism was never a threat to the newly emerging and avaricious German bourgeoisie, who were able to manipulate his advocacy of war and everything militaristic to justify their own plans for imperial expansion at the close of the century. New layers of the middle class oriented towards speculation and the growth of the money markets could also claim Nietzsche's “philosophy of life” as their own: “Life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886).[6]

Nietzsche's determined ideological campaign to turn back the clock of history was to meet a powerful echo in the following century. In two further articles we will examine how very diverse social forces and movements in the twentieth century were able to utilise aspects of Nietzsche's thought for their own agenda.

Notes:

1. Nietzsche's family circumstances point to long-standing problems in his relations with women. On the two occasions in his life when he proposed marriage he was turned down. In their work, not only Nietzsche but also Schopenhauer express the most debased views on women. In his famous essay on Schopenhauer, the outstanding German Marxist Franz Mehring refers to the way in which the philosopher of pessimism compares women to ants in his text: *On Women*. For his part, Nietzsche has a habit of including women in the company of cows. See also *Thus Spake Zarathustra:* “Of Young and Old Women”.

2. For a scathing critique of the spinelessness of German radicals in 1848 see Friedrich Engels' *Germany: Revolution and Counterrevolution*.

3. Despite weaknesses Georg Lukacs: *The Destruction of Reason* (1946) remains one of the best historical treatments of “irrational philosophy” in nineteenth century Germany. As a theorist, Lukacs stood head and shoulders above most of the intellectuals working inside the Stalinist Soviet Union. Nevertheless Lukacs adapts his position to Stalinist orthodoxy on a number of occasions in *The Destruction of Reason.* In the final chapter of the book Lukacs descends in obvious propaganda for Stalin, at one point extolling socialism as a system that encourages “conscious national life and culture”. In other passages of the book Lukacs spreads his web of “irrationalism” too wide. According to Lukacs any progressive bourgeois philosophy had come to any end with Nietzsche. As a result he then proceeds to consign the progressive and democratic elements in the work of a philosopher such as the American pragmatist John Dewey to his general category of irrationalism.

4. The eclectic element of Nietzsche's thought should not be underestimated. In a book which will be referred to in the third part of this series, author Stephen Aschheim notes the establishment in the twentieth century of associations based on Nietzsche's thought advocating, among other things, feminism (*see* note 1), organised religion (*see* note 5) and even vegetarianism!

5. Nietzsche is often depicted as a militant atheist who proclaimed the “Death of God”. Nietzsche never attacks religion from a scientific or materialist standpoint and in his writing he often complains of the spread of secularism. As we have seen he was a consistent advocate of the role of myth and illusion. In fact, in a number of the texts in which he criticises the hypocrisy of *Christian religion* his barbs are directed precisely against the *democratic* elements of Christianity. At certain points in his work Nietzsche speaks positively about certain forms of Indian religion with a strict system of castes and ranks.

6. The young Leon Trotsky wrote a perceptive essay on Nietzsche in the same year that the latter died—1900. Trotsky writes that Nietzsche's philosophy has a particular appeal to what he describes as a *parasitic proletariat*, a social layer arising within capitalism which is more privileged than the mere *lumpenproletariat*. In particular, Trotsky writes, Nietzsche's philosophy of the *Übermensch*, is particularity well suited to justify the ideology of such persons as: “financial adventurers, stock market speculators and unscrupulous politicians and press manipulators”. Trotsky's article is published in *Cahiers de Leon Trotsky*, vol. 1, edited by Pierre Broue.

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