

One hundred years since the death of Friedrich Nietzsche: a review of his ideas and influence—Part 2

Stefan Steinberg
21 October 2000

[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#)

The following is the second of a three-part series. The concluding part will be posted tomorrow.

* * *

*Whom do I hate most among the rabble of today? The socialist rabble, the chandala apostles, who undermine the instinct, the pleasure, the worker's sense of satisfaction with his small existence—who make him envious, who teach him revenge. The source of wrong is never unequal rights but the claim of “equal” rights—Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*, 1888*

*... several of our friends and collaborators have at times the opportunity of observing that the Nietzschean error has helped young Frenchmen to cleanse themselves of the revolutionary error—Charles Maurras in *L'Action française*, 1909*

* * *

Nietzsche and the political right

Charles Maurras was the editor of the French ultra-right-wing newspaper *L'Action française* at the beginning of the twentieth century. Generally speaking his political movement had little time for Germans who, in line with the racist ideology of *Action Française*, were members of the inferior “Slavic” race and therefore “barbarians”. For Maurras and his followers, however, Nietzsche was a “great barbarian” whose work, despite its errors, was a useful antidote to the poison of “revolution” (socialism).

During his lifetime Nietzsche's work was largely disregarded or discounted by the intellectual establishment in Germany. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche (proudly) records that one of his published books had sold just a handful of copies in two years. After his death and in the first decades of the twentieth century, as political tensions grew in Germany and throughout Europe, the situation changed for Nietzsche. One writer comments that many German soldiers went off to fight in the First World War with a copy of the bible in one pocket and Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in the other.

Among Nietzsche's most devoted German adherents at this time were the publicist Oswald Spengler, author of a bitter tirade against socialism and liberal democracy *The Decline of the West*; the young writer Ernest Juenger, who admired Nietzsche's advocacy of the military spirit and the virtue of war; and, amongst the choir of admirers, an Austrian born would-be painter—the young Adolph Hitler. Nietzsche was also to play a powerful role in the development of one of Germany's most prominent philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger.

Nietzsche, anti-Semitism and Gobineau

Many of the commentaries on the Nietzsche anniversary currently circulating in the German press make one and the same point (see for example Manfred Riedel in his essay on Nietzsche in a recent edition of the magazine *Der Spiegel*): it is ludicrous to suggest any connection between the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and extreme-right movements of the twentieth century, in particular National Socialism. Any link between Nietzsche and fascism, such commentators argue, is entirely the product of the distortion of his work undertaken by his sister Elisabeth. It is worth looking more closely at this argument.

First of all, it is correct that following his final mental breakdown and during the last decade of his life, his sister Elisabeth Förster Nietzsche took over prime responsibility for his care. With total control over her brother's literary estate she abused her position of trust to falsify and distort particular aspects of his work. In particular she prevented the publication of his last written text and biographical work *Ecce Homo*, which, with its pronounced tones of megalomania, pointed only too clearly to Nietzsche's impending mental collapse. By all accounts a thoroughly mean and possessive woman, Elisabeth Förster Nietzsche was also a virulent anti-Semite. She tampered with material and forged letters to transform her brother and depict him in the same light, i.e., as a rabid anti-Semite.

There is a famous photo (on display in the current Weimar exhibition) which shows Elisabeth Förster Nietzsche greeting Adolph Hitler, whom she admired intensely, to the house in Weimar where Nietzsche died (1934). During his visit she presented Hitler with her brother's walking stick. Hitler had already visited the Weimar Nietzsche archive in 1932, and another well-known photo shows Hitler glaring fiercely at a bust of the man he regarded as his philosophical mentor.

Nietzsche's own views on the issue of Judaism are complex and often contradictory. Nietzsche's break with Richard Wagner was at least partly based on the latter's persistent advocacy of extreme anti-Semitism; and in 1887 Nietzsche wrote a letter to his sister deploring her marriage to another vicious anti-Semite, Bernhard Förster. In one of his last brief missives to his friend Overbeck he even stated he wished to “shoot all anti-Semites”. On the other hand, throughout his works can be found derogatory references to Judaism—in particular to the role played by the Jews in the degeneration of the Christian religion.

The difficulties of charting Nietzsche's position are expressed most clearly in his work *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). In one passage Nietzsche initially argues that to be anti-Semitic is just as idiotic as to be anti-French, anti-Polish, etc. He then calls for a ban on further

immigration of Jews to Germany, arguing that the country already has too many Jews. Nietzsche then goes on to describe the Jews as the strongest, toughest and purest of all races in Europe and ends by calling for the cross-breeding (*Zuchtung*) of Europe's two purest races (the Jewish and the Germanic) in order to achieve a new powerful ruling caste for the Continent.

The truth is, despite the occasional favourable references to the Jews in his work, what characterises Nietzsche's entire oeuvre are reactionary racist standpoints which were to take a particularly virulent form in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such nostrums found their supreme reactionary expression in the work of the French aristocrat, Count Arthur Gobineau (1816—82).

One of the better contemporary discussions of the development of racist ideas in the nineteenth century is to be found in the book *The Meaning of Race* by Kenan Malik.[1] Malik makes an important point. He argues that the rapid and extreme departure from the progressive Enlightenment conception of race in the second half of the nineteenth century was not just a product of colonial expansion on the part of the great imperialist nations. It also was a reflection of growing social inequality and class antagonisms in the developed European nations themselves.

Malik writes: “The sense of racial superiority that European elite classes felt over the non-European society cannot be understood outside of the sense of the inferiority imposed upon the masses at home.... Indeed I would go further still and argue that the discourse of race arose out of perceived differences within European society and only later was it systematically applied to differences of skin colour” (p. 82).

This point is important with respect to Nietzsche because, as we have already dealt with in our first article, Nietzsche was always extremely sensitive to what he regarded as the dangers arising from the concessions made to broad layers of workers in a democratic form of society. It is therefore not surprising to learn that Nietzsche was extremely enthusiastic about Gobineau's ideas as he first read *Essays on the Inequality of Races*.

Malik quotes from Gobineau's own *Essays on the Inequality of Races* (1853-55): “It has already been established that every social order is founded upon three original classes, each of which represents a racial variety: the nobility, a more or less accurate reflection of the conquering race; the bourgeoisie composed of mixed stock coming close to the chief race; and the common people who live in servitude or at least in a very depressed position. These last belong to a lower race which came about in the south through miscegenation with the Negroes and in the north with the Finns.”

In fact, a form of biological racism is detectable in Nietzsche's work from the very beginning. We have already drawn attention to Nietzsche's treatment of the Greek philosopher Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In an additional essay “The Problem of Socrates”, Nietzsche addresses the issue of Socrates' alleged ugliness and poses the question of whether this characteristic was not the product of “racial cross-breeding”: “Was Socrates a Greek at all? Ugliness is often enough the expression of a development that has been crossed, thwarted by crossing.”

The impact of Gobineau's ideas is almost certainly apparent in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) . Beginning with the claim that the genealogical method is the correct one, Nietzsche states: “In Latin *malus* ... could indicate the common man as the dark one, especially as the black-haired one, as the pre-Aryan dweller of the Italian soil which distinguished itself most clearly through his colour

from blonds who became their masters, namely the Aryan conquering race.”

In the manner of Gobineau, Nietzsche then goes on to incorporate the struggle against socialism and the commune (the most primitive form of society) into a crude racially-based depiction of historical development: “Who can say whether modern democracy, even more modern anarchism and especially that inclination for the “*commune*”, for the most primitive form of society, which is now shared by all the socialists of Europe, does not signify in the main a tremendous *counterattack*—and that the conqueror and *master race*, the Aryan, is not succumbing physiologically, too?”

Nietzsche continues: “These carriers of the most humiliating and vengeance-seeking instincts, the descendants of all European and non-European slavery, especially of the pre-Aryan people—they represent mankind's regression!” And finally Nietzsche concludes with a hymn of praise to the “blond Germanic beast”: “At heart in these predominant races we cannot mistake the bird of prey, the *blond beast* who lusts after booty and victory.... The deep, icy mistrust the German brings forth when he comes to power, even today, is an echo of the indelible outrage with which Europe looked on the rage of the blond Germanic beast for hundreds of years.”

Let us be absolutely clear about what Nietzsche is saying in these passages. According to his thesis socialists, democrats and the broad masses of society are the products of the most primitive form of pre-Aryan society. Their very existence threatens the purity of the Aryan master race, the *blond beast*. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has already declared that the preservation of the *over-man* (Übermensch) is the highest good and justifies: “the greatest evil”.

Apologists for Nietzsche seek to distance him from the policy and activities of the Nazis. But is Nietzsche's position here so remote from Adolph Hitler's entreaty, in an internal NSDAP memo of 1922, for the: “most uncompromising and brutal determination to destroy and liquidate Marxism”? Adolph Hitler was certainly no philosopher, just as Nietzsche was not merely a political ideologue. But who can reasonably doubt that the former had little difficulty in seamlessly incorporating the latter's thoroughly backward-looking programme of biological racism, hatred of socialism and the concept of social equality—together with his advocacy of militarism and war—into the eclectic baggage of ideas which constituted the programme of National Socialism?

Notes:

(1) Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, 1996, Macmillan Press



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact