

# **Nietzsche's Reluctant Acceptance of Liberal Democracy (and later Rejection)**

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## **Introduction**

The questions to be addressed in this essay are 1) whether we can extract from Nietzsche's book *Human, All Too Human*, which was written in his more moderate science-oriented middle period, something of a political view; 2) whether this view can be construed, with some hedging here and there, as supporting modern liberal democracy; and 3) whether Nietzsche's qualified endorsement, or maybe better formulated, *reluctant acceptance* of liberal democracy can be found in his other works.

This should be an interesting challenge because the book has many passages in which he deals with the relationship between, on one side man and on the other culture, society and the state. The initial focus will be on chapter eight, titled "A Look at the State", in which we can find most of his thinking about the state, class, caste, socialism, nationalism, anarchism, democracy, war, religion, "Great politics" and many other themes connected to political thought. I will make here and there some excursions into the future, not into Nazi Germany, but into the post-WWII West in which liberal democracy has firmly established itself, and try to figure out how Nietzsche might have come down in different political issues.

## **Liberal Democracy: Cynically and Conditionally Accepted**

The very first section (438) in this chapter is already rich with ideas which could support a liberal, democratic form of government, but not without some cynical denigrations about the mental capacity of the *demos* and warnings for the misfortunes it could heap upon itself. First, Nietzsche observes and accepts that something of an earthquake-like change has occurred in politics, highly probably referring to the rise of democracy and constitutional government, and that this change just has to be accepted. It would be futile not to accept it. If the goal of politics is now to make life bearable for the most amount of people through democratic politics with all its demagoguery, lies and manipulations, then, so be it. Nietzsche seems to look at this state of affairs like a force of nature to adapt to, not an arrangement he would necessarily recommend. Actually, he is quite cynical about it and sets some conditions to make it minimally acceptable for him and his fellow (or future) *free spirits*. His quite humorous cynicism about democracy is based on a very denigrating view of the intellectual capacity of the population and is visible for example in his quote from Voltaire, who wrote that "Once the populace begins to reason, all is lost". Nietzsche thinks that the narrow-minded masses can only contain "five or six concepts" in their heads--and they are even proud of that--and believes that they are quite deluded in thinking that they have the capacity to come up with the right policies to increase their own well-being. But, as long as they are deluded, Nietzsche avers, they will "gladly bear the fatal consequences of their narrowness" (438). So, Nietzsche sees some

dangers lurking in the democratic set-up and, because democracy can be a dangerous homogenizer of people, he makes a plea for the freedom 1) for some people to stand aside from politics; 2) for some people to be not too serious about the well-being of the many and even be ironic about it; and 3) for some people to emerge from the masses and try out some unconventional thinking and expressing themselves.

The above enumerated conditions for some spirits to have a little unconventional freedom to make themselves heard is not necessarily just for the sake of such *free spirits* or would-be *free spirits*. Earlier in the book, in his crucial passages about such *free spirits* and their role in society (224-237), Nietzsche made it quite clear in biologicistic terms that such freedom is essential for a culture to further develop. Unbound spirits maim their society by experimenting with new and different expressions and society reacts by getting inoculated through assimilating the new into their bloodstream. "Wherever progress is to ensue, deviating natures are of the greatest importance" (224).

### **The Necessity of a Permeable Class Society**

Another condition for society to develop and create a "higher culture" is the existence of a stratified population with an "idle caste" on top and a "working caste" at the bottom. Because the upper crust is capable of a more refined sensitivity and deeper suffering and has the wealth and leisure to do so, it can set the conditions for a higher culture to emerge and sustain. With its wealth it can afford the most beautiful women (apparently regardless of caste); the best teachers; avoid mind-numbing labor; and be clean and healthy (479).

And if there is some permeability between the two castes, when upper class individuals and whole families become so obtuse to become demoted to the lower class and, other way around, deserving individuals from the working class, for example beautiful women and good teachers, but especially *free spirits*, rise up and get accepted in the leisure class, then such an arrangement would be very good according to Nietzsche. It is not entirely clear though what he meant with his valuing expression, that, if this state is achieved, then beyond it "only the open sea of indefinite desires is still visible" (439). What does he mean with, in his original German, "das offene Meer unbestimmter Wünsche", and what does it indicate as far as importance is concerned? Is he saying that, if there is social mobility between the classes and newly, self-minted *free spirits* arise from the lower classes, then such spirits can, or even should forthwith enter the upper class, take advantage of its leisure, and start experimenting with unconventional ways of being, because only if such a flow of individuals is established then any and all of the higher and still undetermined desires can come to fruition in higher cultural expressions? And was this mobility more prevalent in the past, as Nietzsche finishes the section with "Thus the fading voice of the old era speaks to us; but where are the ears left to hear it?" (339). I dwell on this expression because it has such a positive visionary ring to it, which is not often found in Nietzsche's non-fictional prose writings.

## The Danger of Secularism and Egalitarianism

Another danger of democracy, and this one Nietzsche thought to be more of a long-term threat still in the future, is that it radically transforms the relationship between the government and the people, from a hierarchical structure, like one has with the teacher-pupil, master-slave or father-family relationship, to an egalitarian relation in which the government is seen as "an organ of the people", or better said in Lincoln's Gettysburg address, "government of the people, by the people, for the people". Apparently Nietzsche will have none of that, but thinks there is still time, a century or so, for that unfortunate idea to become reality and therefore cautions to go slow in this regard (450).

If one looks at the 1970s (a little less than a hundred years after Nietzsche wrote the above warning) as the epitome of the West's realization of the democratic spirit and economic equality, then one could see Nietzsche as somewhat prophetic. He might have abhorred it, but nevertheless foresaw it coming. He would have been gratified though that soon after, most of the policies leading to that moment in the West were turned around in the 1980s by the implementation of neoliberal policies developed by the Chicago School and the "1980s Project" within the Council of Foreign Relations (Shoup & Minter; Sklar). And he might have been enamored by the rise of the hard, elitist, economic shock doctrine of so-called "disaster capitalism" (Klein). But he might not be enamored by the further extension of these privatization policies, because they are now gradually putting corporations in charge of many of the functions previously executed by the state, with some politicians and thinkers explicitly trying to diminish the state into a minimal entity which ultimately might lead to the "*death of the state*" (472; italics in original). Nietzsche again shows himself prophetic here. How far his warning for the corporate take-over of the state could be interpreted as anti-corporatism and therefore as proto-anti-fascist is an open question.

## Democracy, Religion and Anarchism

Another disadvantage of the democratic state is that it forces religion from the public into the private sphere and therefore cannot be used anymore by the state as a force of societal cohesion and appeasement in times of trouble. And it will weaken the state itself because its "*mysterium*" is diminished and people will have less respect for it. This might then open the road, as observed before, for private contractors to come in and gradually take over the business of the state to the point of the "*death of the state*" (472; italics in original). As he summarizes it himself:

To recapitulate briefly, the interests of tutelary government and the interests of religion go together hand in hand, so that if the latter begins to die out, the foundation of the state will also be shaken. The belief in a divine order of political affairs, in a *mysterium* in the existence of the state, has a religious origin; if religion disappears, the state will inevitably lose its old veil of Isis and no longer awaken awe. The sovereignty of the people, seen closely, serves to scare off even the last trace of magic and superstition contained in these feelings; modern democracy is the historical form of the *decline of the state* (472; italics in original).

Even though Nietzsche seems to lament the possible decline of the state, he is not entirely dismissive of it. If and when it happens humanity's clever and selfish resilience will be such that chaos will not come about and that "an invention more expedient than the state will triumph over the state". But humanity is still far away from such anarchism. People are too afraid to contemplate it and the organizational forms to replace the state have not yet been developed, though some arrogant minds with a deficient notion of history, obviously referring to his anarchist contemporaries, might think they have the required ideas and try to implement them. Meanwhile, the same selfishness and cleverness which might devise new forms of societal organization to replace the state in the distant future, will fortunately strengthen the state for the time being and ward off anarchist attempts at its destruction. Though Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen in her study on Nietzsche's reception in America, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas*, makes it clear that American anarchists were very appreciative of Nietzsche, the feelings were not reciprocal.

### **Socialism: The Great Danger to Adept to**

Whereas democracy is in Nietzsche's assessment an inevitable development carrying some grave but maybe manageable risks, socialism is a far greater danger which can and should be managed at all cost. The manner in which Nietzsche perceives socialism is important because it carries explicit and implicit policy proposals both limiting and expanding the powers of his begrudgingly accepted constitutional, liberal democracy.

Though he concedes the truth of the socialist analysis that the current distribution of wealth and privileges is based on "countless injustices and atrocities", he denies them the right to rectify it through redistribution (452). At a concrete political level this would imply that Nietzsche would have opposed many, if not most, taxation schemes, especially the progressive income tax, and would have opposed any social programs like a public pension system or universal health care. He would, by the same logic, also have opposed any wealth redistribution *upwards*. He would arguably have rejected the current policy of "private profits, public losses" and let bankruptcies naturally occur because some firms were obviously not fit, and let their failing, unfit CEOs and CFOs get demoted to the lower class.

The non-rectification of past injustices will also imply, for example here in the USA, that there will be no affirmative action to rectify the long-term effects of the countless atrocities of slavery, nor restitution to the Native American Indians for the holocaust perpetrated upon them. Actually, Nietzsche thinks that slaves "live more securely and happy" than the proletariat and that the sentiment driving the abolition of slavery is not the concern about human dignity, but some kind of vanity about equality (457). This perspective shows Nietzsche's very elitist, paternalistic, though still somewhat compassionate, attitude.

Instead of redistribution, Nietzsche advocates a "gradual transformation of attitude", such that the sense of justice will increase and violence decrease (452). What

the practical consequences would be is not entirely clear, but Nietzsche might accept institutions like toothless reconciliation commissions and the like if he thinks it would contribute to his proposed change of attitude without the guilty parties having to pay indemnities. Otherwise the slogan rules that *might made right*. If there would be anything close to a socialist sense of justice and equality it would apply *only* amongst the members of the ruling elite themselves. Nietzsche does not take this idea serious though, because he thinks that it is promoted by noble, but not very insightful representatives of that class (451).

But, in case socialism becomes really a major force and comes out of hiding to engage the powers that be by social warfare (which in his perception had not yet happened), then, depending on a realistic assessment of its force, a compromise in the form of a treaty might be necessary. Only then socialism will gain rights--presumably anchored in legislation—and can workers demand justice in terms of the treaty (446). What concrete policies could be found in such a treaty? Maybe, given the plight of late nineteenth century workers and their demands, this might mean the 40-hour work week, fair pay, the right to unionize, free choice of employment, elimination of child labor, and, later, paid vacations, social security, socialized medicine, etc. So, even if Nietzsche might not like such policies, especially not those which need funding and the redistribution of wealth, he would by necessity accept compromise.

### **Communism: To be Avoided**

Maybe he accepted some compromise with the demands of the oppressed, because one alternative, communist revolution, would be far worse. He is afraid that the “passionate idiocies and half-truths” of Rousseau, for example the superstitious belief in “a wondrous, innate, ... but *repressed* goodness of human nature”, might inspire people to “the overthrow of all orders” with the expectation of establishing a new, just order *ex nihilo*. Nietzsche thinks that that cannot happen and that instead revolution will lead to disaster in which the wildest energies of humanity are resurrected and no real reconstruction is possible (463). Socialism could only establish and maintain itself by creating an absolute state with its citizens in complete subjugation and subjected to severe state terrorism (473). Nietzsche really is upset with Rousseau and thinks that because of him “the *spirit of enlightenment and of progressive development* has been scared off for a long time to come ...” (463; italics in original).

### **Reactionary Repression: Not Good Either**

It is admittedly quite speculative, but it is possible that Nietzsche is thinking above, not of the direct effects of the French Revolution—that event had come and gone—but of the long-term, anti-progressive, repressive policies associated with Austrian minister of foreign affairs and post-Napoleonic *Concert of Europe* architect, Klemens von Metternich, which were formulated in fearful reaction to the Rousseau inspired revolution, and were perceived by many as an obstacle to enlightened progress. One could argue that Nietzsche in his anti-revolutionary, pro-aristocratic zeal might have sided with a conservative like Metternich, but it might be more probable that

he found Metternich too repressive and reactionary and realized that his own writings might have been censored and he himself spied upon. If that ever would have happened, the acidic venom of his pen would have been excruciatingly painful for the authorities (and maybe helpful for an earlier breakthrough if jailed). The criteria used to negatively evaluate a repressive conservatism *a la* Metternich might be the same which Nietzsche used to reluctantly accept democracy, and that is that there should be space for *free spirits* to engage in unconventional thinking, writing and publishing in order to keep society fit and help its development. His aversion of repression based on his belief in "the *spirit of enlightenment and of progressive development* " indicates that he would accept maybe an enlightened despotism in which an aristocracy rules together with an established religion and in which there is also some freedom of expression.

In this context I am wondering where Nietzsche might have come down in the case of the 1973 *coup d'état* in Chile against the democratically elected socialist President Salvador Allende which led to the brutal military *junta* under General Augusto Pinochet. Would he have reluctantly accepted Allende's policies as the understandable outcome of democracy (or maybe even as the rightful assertion of the Chilean state in the face of foreign interests)? Or would he have accepted the Pinochet regime with its reactionary, repressive policies as a rightful assertion of its upper class? It probably all hinges on his 'highest value', that is, the freedom of *free spirits* to do their thing, in which case I think he would have sided with Allende and hope for the best.

### **Gathering of the Positions**

Can we combine the above political thoughts into a qualified endorsement of liberal democracy? Quite so, I think. It is the conclusion, and most people are familiar with this, that liberal democracy, with all its faults and drawbacks, is also in Nietzsche's thinking the least bad form of government. Nietzsche does not state it as such, but in his *via negativa politicus*, if I may coin a Latinism, the only thing standing is liberal democracy, including some reluctant adaptations to workers' rights; possible endorsement of neoliberal policies; and at least some form of cultural and social libertarianism; and all together perceived as an acceptable, temporary balance of different political-ideological wills to power. He rejects, going from left to right, anarchism (too young but promising); communism (too naive and destructive); socialism (too totalitarian and terrorist); enlightened despotism with an established religion (anachronistic, but still possible as runner-up); repressive conservatism (too repressive and stifling); Corporism (weakens the state); and Fascism (too nationalist and socialist, but not excluded).

### **After Human, all too Human**

Does the above qualified, temporary acceptance of liberal democracy survive in his later works, for example in *Beyond Good and Evil*? In a previous entry I contemplated a possible change of mind by Nietzsche regarding the best possible set-up of a state for *free spirits* to flourish. I thought initially that Nietzsche in *Human, all too Human* was promoting the idea that *free spirits* were basically individualistic free agents

in a stratified, but still liberal democratic society and that later, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), Nietzsche changed his mind towards a more collectivist, aristocratic form of political organization as the preferred possibility condition for *free spirits* to execute their cultural transformations. A crucial and disturbing passage expressing a harsher view of the lower classes and the prerogative of the upper class is in section 258 of BGE:

The essential characteristic of good and healthy aristocracy, however, is that it experiences itself *not* as a function (whether of the monarchy or the commonwealth) but as their *meaning* and highest justification--that it therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments. Their fundamental faith simply has to be that society must *not* exist for society's sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of *being ...*" (BGE, 258; italics in original).

Compared with the deeper investigations of Nietzsche's political thinking in *Human, All too Human*, the essential difference seems to be that Nietzsche dished any acceptance of democracy, however reluctant that might have been, and takes back any possible compromise with the working class and their sense of human and workers' rights. Democracy is merely the heir of Christianity (BGE, 202), inherently fractured (BGE, 208) and leads inevitably to tyranny (BGE, 242). He advises, and seems to prefer, for Europe "to *acquire one will*" and leave behind petty politics (BGE, 208). Therefore, if such ideas like democracy and human rights are tossed, then he can 'overcome' his previous reluctant acceptance of liberal democracy and go all out with a cruel, self-assertive, self-legislating, "value-creating" (BGE, 260; italics in original) upper class and reduce the rest of mankind to the status of *Untermensch* to be exploited, which is fine because exploitation "belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life" (BGE, 259; italics in original). Here we can unfortunately see the foreshadows of a fascist ideology.

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