

Discussion of a Paper by Ludwig Marcuse on the Relationship of Need and Culture in Nietzsche (July 14, 1942)

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Précis of the Paper

Three questions:

What did the Culture against which Nietzsche wrote look like?

What did the culture for which Nietzsche wrote look like?

What is our attitude toward his “longing” [*Sehnsucht*]?

Nietzsche was disgusted by German megalomania that was not ashamed of its own power. He stated [ironically] that Sedan [the decisive German victory over France in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War] was also a victory . . . of German culture. What repulsed him especially was “the expression of satisfaction on [the Germans’] faces,” a satisfaction that “had never been poorer in love and kindness.” Nietzsche scoffs: “it is plainly the purpose of all culture to turn the rapacious animal ‘man’ into a tame and civilized animal, a domesticated animal.” The bearer of this “domesticated animal culture” is most forcefully depicted in “The Last Man” [viz. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*]. With a wink he asks: “What is longing?”

Nietzsche identified this “most contemptible being” with his contemporaries; seen from a later perspective, however, this being came to fruition in the terror of two generations hence.

In opposition to this culture of “The Last Man,” Nietzsche juxtaposed three images of culture. All three share the proposition that “God is dead.” The creators of the three cultures are: “the artistic genius,” “the free spirit” or “blond beast,” and “the superman.” The culture of the artistic genius entails the violent subordination of life to art. In Germany this idea seemed to have been introduced by Kant and Schopenhauer and ultimately consummated with Wagner. The seriousness of Nietzsche’s aestheticism is grounded in the belief that art alone confers form on chaos. “Culture is only a paper-thin veneer covering white-hot chaos.” But to impose form on chaos means at the same time to veil it. Truth, however, means to stare it in the eye without veil and ideology. Thus, the genius’s successor became the “free spirit.” He preaches against artistic appearance: “you shall not seek refuge in a metaphysics, but shall sacrifice yourselves actively for the sake of the nascent culture!” Nietzsche played the gay scientist: “culture means learning how to

calculate, learning to think causally.” However, the “blond beast,” his complement, gathers into a unity what the “free spirit” unravels. “The blond beast” is not only Cesare Borgia and Napoleon, but also the “Prussian soldier.” His task is to impose military discipline on the chaos of impulsive drives; he is the utterly sober, pragmatic successor of the form-giving artist.

It is only with the “superman” that the new, distinctly Nietzschean aspect is added: in the superman, all utopias of history have a place – the sermon on the mount as well as the classless society: “I see something higher and more human above me than I am myself; all of you, lend me your help to reach it, as I will help everybody who recognizes something similar and suffers from something like this: so that at least that human being may rise again who feels himself to be full and boundless in his ability to have insights and to love, to perceive and to accomplish, and with all his total being is attached to and a part of nature as the judge and standard for an evaluation of the things.”

What binds me to Nietzsche? First, the insight that every intellectual and spiritual bond – every religion, every system, every guarantee – has rightfully been dissolved. Second, the insight that even the most sublime act of violence, that rape committed by the philosopher king and by the genius, is not a solution. In brief, what binds me to Nietzsche is his radical labor of destruction – a labor that, it seems to me, stopped only before his belief in chaos. This binds me to Nietzsche’s “longing.” Whether this longing will ultimately be satisfied is infinitely dubious both to him and to me. All that is left for us is “to be courageous, whatever the result might be.” Or, as I would express this thought: to hope despite all doubts. For us, there exists only one imperative: to follow the path of that longing. But there remains a chance; for longing has stayed alive with as much tenacity as hunger, which is a sub-category of longing. Apart from this vague chance, is contemporary man lost? Not entirely. Paradise is not merely a final state; all cultures are also anticipation of this utopia. Both we and the dead are premature and miserable participants in what may or may not come.

Discussion

HERBERT MARCUSE: Why the contrast between the superman and the blond beast?

Did Nietzsche not see also the blond beast as already utopian?

LUDWIG MARCUSE: Nietzsche’s language fluctuates a lot. His semantic boundaries are very schematic.

N.B.G. (never identified): Wouldn’t there be greater clarity if we included the 11 commandments?

GÜNTHER ANDERS: They are only prohibitions. Do you believe that Nietzsche imagined a utopian society made up of supermen? I believe he imagined it as a mixture of supermen and last men. – You spoke of Nietzsche’s belief in chaos. Nietzsche believes that God is dead, that we do not know why we exist. I believe that the superman is the one who accepts affirmatively that we do not

know why we exist. The central concept here is *amor fati*. Nietzsche did not offer a positive transformation of the world, but instead an acceptance of the world as it is.

HORKHEIMER: All the fears and problems that Nietzsche treats are not merely the fears of a small group; they also play a small part in the life of the individual. If I were to ask each one of us here what his most fundamental concern is, he would perhaps say: I am afraid of fascism, of the world around me, material fears. Most people live under terrible pressure; the concept of longing could be considered a thin abstraction that arises from their concrete longings. Marx would have very much objected to the utilization of longing as a critical concept. Since capitalism is in a position to satisfy most of our material needs, as well as to allay the causes of our fears, we should recognize that our thinking, as well as that of Nietzsche, will look radically different when these immediate threats are removed.

LUDWIG MARCUSE: I do not believe that Nietzsche's problems are those of a small group. I believe that unconsciously they are the essential problems of millions. It is one of the most terrible things that we cannot know anything at all. Kleist died over the *Critique of Pure Reason* (see his correspondence with his sister). Man's loneliness is something other than the fact that he cannot have the warmth that he needs. What Nietzsche means by loneliness is to have to live without meaning. Do we really have the right to consider everything that does not pertain to hunger and sex as non-existent?

HORKHEIMER: To what extent is the elimination of human misery the motive force in relationship to which all other problems will have to step temporarily into the background, insofar as they are ideological?

LUDWIG MARCUSE: But that can't be determined by conceptual analysis.

ADORNO: As with Nietzsche's pathos, his concept of longing has for us something enigmatic about it; it is like a blind spot, as is the case with Ibsen. There is an element of art nouveau ornamentation with Nietzsche. As a precondition of the discussion we must acknowledge that Nietzsche's entire discussion occurs in the realm of ideology. We must thereby ascertain the real motives that lie hidden beneath the ideological motives. Nietzsche's critique of culture has, despite his categories, identified certain aspects of the social problematic that are not given per se in the critique of political economy. He has developed certain critical intentions farther than they have been elaborated in the post-Marxist tradition. We need to decipher Nietzsche in order to see what kind of fundamental experiences lie behind his approach. I believe that one will then arrive at things which are not so separate from the interest of most people. The idea of "No shepherd and one herd" suggests the idea that, in a certain respect, domination might survive the immediate forms of domination; that domination can infiltrate human beings themselves. Could they not be dominated without actually being under domination? Longing pertains not only to the Nora-syndrome [in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*]; it also has to do with the fact that people

have the feeling, despite the apparent satisfaction of their material needs, that something isn't right. But this is not something internal; it probably has to do with their expectation that tomorrow they will certainly be destroyed by the "mechanisms." It is the effort to think beyond the next stage of material satisfaction, to envision the totality of bodily happiness. And what about the question of satiety? The thing that repulsed Nietzsche when he saw these contented faces was the fact that the satisfaction of the contented was being paid for with the senseless suffering of the many, and this is reflected in their ill-will. He did not believe that one can do away with hunger through concessions. I believe it is quite similar with the concept of longing. We should attempt to accomplish this labor of translation, to bring about what transcends a short-term materialism.

FRIEDRICH POLLOCK: If people are so truly concerned with domination in the abstract sense we have been discussing, what is left of the meaning of domination? Socialism, without the content that Marx attributed to it. I don't believe that Adorno's interpretation is correct. Doesn't the image that Bebel sketched in *Women and Socialism* correspond to the image of longing of all people?

LUDWIG MARCUSE: Adorno tries to save Nietzsche by shaping him on a Marxian lathe.

HORKHEIMER: Adorno wanted to say that the expression that certain structures assume in Nietzsche is not merely a reflex but represents something essential.

HERBERT MARCUSE: If Marx is right, then Nietzsche is wrong. His image of the last man is in fact that of the first. Nietzsche envisions a mankind without longing whose needs have all been technically satisfied. But it does not have to be the case that a mankind whose needs have been satisfied no longer has any longing. On the contrary. Here Nietzsche stands in agreement with Bebel. But one can very well imagine that people will first be capable of longing when their material needs have been satisfied.

N.B.G.: How are the Marxian and Nietzschean concepts to be reconstructed?

ANDERS: Perhaps one can use Marx to interpret Nietzsche, but not vice versa. Nietzsche is not a revolutionary who wanted to transform the world; he has merely erected an image, he does nothing for his goal (longing as secularized prayer).

HORKHEIMER: What concerns us are the following questions: Before the war we had been led to believe that in Russia everything was being done for the sake of satisfying material needs. Is there nevertheless a reason to be against Russia? Marx spoke out in favor of remedying hunger, Nietzsche in favor of longing. Is not the claim of longing in itself contradictory?

ADORNO: I believe that a dialectical relationship exists here. When all human beings have enough to eat, they will not be a mass of petty bourgeois philistines; the idea of being a petty bourgeois philistine would itself die out. Here precisely lies the motive that binds us to Nietzsche. Nietzsche stands in relationship to Bebel only in the sense that he uses him to specify those things that in reality are ideology. One can pinpoint in Nietzsche those elements

where his theory is true. He perceives that not only democracy, but also socialism has become an ideology. One must formulate socialism in such a way that it loses its ideological character. In certain critical respects, Nietzsche progressed further than Marx, insofar as he had a greater aversion vis-à-vis the bourgeois. In the chapter dealing with “Of Passing By” [in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] Nietzsche shows that he is not only a critic of culture, but he was also against that kind of critique of culture that remained individualistic. In other words, Nietzsche’s critique is directed not only against democracy, but also against individualist society. Objectively the concept of love for him means solidarity.

POLLOCK: Marx’s first man is not Nietzsche’s last man. Is man still concerned with higher things when he has enough to eat? What’s left when hunger has been satisfied?

HORKHEIMER: Nietzsche did not treat longing in a way that was effusive; for him longing is the negation of very concrete things. The last man for Nietzsche is not, however, that person who has enough meat for his dinner. Nietzsche has in mind here the entire [bourgeois] culture of satiety [*Genügsamkeitskultur*]. I do not believe in a system in which there exist primary and secondary needs. We believe that society is a totality and that one cannot single out from it any number of specific things. Marx said so long as a certain material need exists in society, the most important thing to do is to remove it. Under these circumstances is not any style of writing that fails to call a spade a spade – does not admit that it is our task to change these circumstances – afflicted by a profound contradiction?

LUDWIG MARCUSE: In this longing resides precisely what Marx meant by a classless society.

HORKHEIMER: Marx did not speak about love, he was content to denounce society. Can one really formulate [a critical perspective] other than that? Can the desire to know be isolated from reality? Knowledge is unable to bring us peace concerning what may lie behind life. Mankind is not in despair over its lack of such knowledge. How can we have knowledge about something other than the social relationships whose transformation, in the sense of their amelioration, i.e., of a non-exploitative society, is conceivable? I see longing as an expression of embarrassment. Without a certain praxis the idea of a “classless society” is also an expression of an embarrassment.

ADORNO: I would not wish to appropriate from Nietzsche concepts such as love and longing as positive correctives. Nietzsche does not reproach existing society with insufficient love, but its critics. To me this seems to contain a hint in the direction of something that goes beyond what is merely cloudy and vague. Nietzsche realized that the idea of socialism is tied to a concept of praxis that is not merely a reflection of contemporary society. Marx could say that it is naturally a reflection of society. On the other hand, it seems that already in Nietzsche’s day the whole nexus of concepts like praxis, organization, and so

forth, showed a side whose implications are becoming only apparent today. Nietzsche withdrew from the demands of the day for the sake of advancing a number of the categories in question. He understood that, in and of itself, the concept of praxis is inadequate to differentiate between a barbarian and a non-barbarian world. Precisely the point where he refused to provide his philosophy with prescriptive instructions is its moment of truth. All-inclusive, all-defining praxis has a tendency to continue to reproduce the form of domination over and above domination as such. The introjection of domination within persons means that they no longer have needs other than those prescribed by invisible domination. Nietzsche's aversion for all questions having to do with man's material existence certainly has its negative side, but it also shows that he understood that there is something bad about the concept of total praxis. Nietzsche places the whole question of the relationship between communism and anarchism in its second phase. Thus the seriousness of culture. Otherwise one runs the risk of transforming socialism into a pragmatism magnified to planetary dimensions.

ANDERS: Nietzsche has only an apparent utopia. The superman is he who can shoulder the burden of nothingness. Does he have his contemporaries in mind or someone who comes later? He did not provide prescriptions for the simple reason that he did not mean it as a utopia, but as someone who stands face to face with nothingness. Nietzsche, in dealing with Marx, is cowardly.

POLLOCK: In those days, it was not yet dangerous for those who did not receive a government-paid income to speak out. Hence, the objection of cowardice against Nietzsche is inadequate.

(Translated by Michael Winkler and Richard Wolin)