

# One hundred years since the death of Friedrich Nietzsche: a review of his ideas and influence—Part 3

By Stefan Steinberg  
23 October 2000

Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3

*The following is the conclusion of a three-part series.*

\*\*\*

*“I have come to the conclusion that Nietzsche is probably a greater thinker than Marx”—Max Horkheimer, 1969*

## Nietzsche and the political left

In the first two articles in this series I have briefly indicated some of the main currents of Nietzsche's thought :

- \* the strict rejection of the pursuit for truth (in science and art) in favour of the advocacy of myth and illusion;

- \* opposition to any form of democratic society (in particular socialist or workers democracy) in favour of an elite society based on a strict definition of rank;

- \* a conception of historical development largely based on a form of biological racism.

Despite his occasional invocation of some of the outstanding figures of the Enlightenment, the sum of these conceptions in the form worked out by Nietzsche represents the most consistent ideological onslaught in the nineteenth century against the progressive ideals (equality, fraternity, solidarity) initially raised by the new ruling class of the bourgeoisie in the course of conducting its revolution against feudal backwardness.

In Nietzsche's own lifetime the socialist movement established a material basis for the concretisation of such ideals on the basis of an international perspective based on the abolition of private property. It is possible to chart the impetus of Nietzsche's own work in line with the emergence of such an organised working class in the form of the socialist movement. Although there is not the slightest evidence to suggest Nietzsche ever made any effort to study socialist literature or the works of Marx and Engels, any serious examination can only lead to the conclusion that Nietzsche regarded himself and his work as an antipode to scientific method, the aims of the socialist movement and the general progressive tendencies expressed in Enlightenment thought.

It is therefore initially surprising perhaps that Nietzsche's ideas were also taken up by a number of figures associated with the socialist movement and the political left, some of whom went so far as to attempt to synthesise or reconcile the work of Nietzsche with that of Karl Marx.

Leading members of the German Frankfurt School of Critical Theory as well as many adherents of the more recent post-structuralist and post-modernist movements would no doubt proclaim their hostility to the types of racist utterances which crop up in Nietzsche's work. The vast majority of representatives of these movements would undoubtedly distance themselves from Nietzsche's glorification of war and belligerent militarism. Nevertheless, as we shall record, a certain sort of mechanism is at work whereby, under specific social conditions, intellectuals with some association to socialist and democratic ideals are capable of an

extraordinary and selective myopia regarding the essential thrust of Nietzsche's work. Certain aspects of Nietzsche's thought are appropriated for specific purposes while the general character of his work is ignored or played down.

## Early adherents of Nietzsche inside the SPD

One of the most detailed accounts of this process and a work dealing with the repercussions of Nietzsche's thought in Germany is Steven E. Aschheim's : *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990*. In a particularly interesting chapter entitled *Nietzschean Socialism: Left and Right* Aschheim deals with Nietzsche's influence in German movements of both the right wing and the left. Aschheim has already described in a previous chapter how certain sections of the radical right wing and traditional German “völkish” movements were able to use Nietzsche as a hammer against Marx: “Here Nietzsche could function as an effective counterfoil to Marx by emphasising the cultural over the material and the spiritual over the economic” (p. 144).

The first great socialist theoretician to deal with the significance of Nietzsche was the leading historian and philosopher of the SPD (Social Democratic Party), Franz Mehring, who described Nietzsche as the “philosopher of developed capitalism”, expressing the interests of the bourgeoisie in its most aggressive form. Aschheim makes clear that Mehring's tackling of the significance of Nietzsche was not merely a pedagogical exercise. Already towards the end of the nineteenth century elements inside the SPD were expressing their support for Nietzschean ideas.

A group of ultra-left radicals had formed inside the German SPD with the title—the “*Jungen*”. Under the leadership of Bruno Wille the group embraced a type of Nietzschean-based individualism accusing the party leadership of bourgeois conformism because the SPD had adopted a course involving participation in elections, taking seats in parliament, etc.—precisely the course advocated by one of the founders of modern socialism, Frederick Engels. For four years a fierce discussion raged in the party press. Wille accused the party of being sclerotic and increasingly divorced from the masses. As the smoke cleared towards the end of the heated debate it became clear that the target of attack for the *Jungen* was not so much the policies of the SPD but Marxism itself. Many members of the *Jungen* went onto leave the party to become “independent socialists” and founded their own newspaper the *Socialist*.

The basis for a so-called “Nietzschean anarchism” was elaborated most fully by Gustav Landauer (1870-1919), who for a time was editor of the *Socialist*. Turning a blind eye to Nietzsche's polemics against human solidarity and communal social interest, Landauer adopted Nietzsche's voluntarism, his critique of materialism as well as his occasional tirades against capitalism and the “money economy” to establish the foundations for his own version of anarchism.

Another group crystallised inside the SPD around the figure of Karl Leuthner and the influential social-democrat magazine *Sozialistische Monatshefte*. This group stood to the right of the party leadership and drew from Nietzsche's vitalist philosophy as well as his advocacy of militarism to argue for an aggressive and nationalist foreign policy on the part of the SPD to challenge the authority of the existing great imperialist powers. Leuthner was fiercely attacked for his theses at the time by social democratic leader Karl Kautsky.

Kautsky was able to successfully polemicise against anarchist forces in and around the SPD but, under pressure from the apparatus and the trade unions, the majority of the party under his leadership eventually capitulated to the war lobby and ended up voting in support credits for the Kaiser's war in 1914.

Although Nietzsche's ideas never had a large following inside the party Aschheim makes clear that, at a very early stage, a number of groups turned to Nietzsche in order to combat the original Marxist principles which inspired the SPD in its initial decades of activity. Although he concentrates his analysis on Germany, Aschheim also points to the following for Nietzsche by a number of other leading socialists in other countries: Anatoli Lunacharski and Stanislav Volsky in pre-revolutionary Russia, Victor Adler in Austria and Benito Mussolini in Italy.

### **The Frankfurt School for Social Research**

After dealing with the early adherents of Nietzsche in the socialist movement, Aschheim also tackles the evolution of members of the Frankfurt School. The history of the Frankfurt School for Social Research and the role played by Nietzsche in its development (or rather decline) is a complex question which can hardly be done justice within the space of a few pages.[1] Nevertheless Aschheim does indicate that discussions on the significance of Nietzsche's work played a key role, particularly in the post-war development of the School.

The Frankfurt School for Social Research was established at the beginning of the 1920s by a group of intellectuals, many of whom came from a Jewish background. The main figures of the school remained unaffiliated to any particular political party. Nevertheless they made no secret of their basic socialist orientation, their opposition to the betrayals carried out by the SPD (support for the war in 1914, the crushing of the German revolution of 1919) and their sympathy for the Russian Revolution. In his writings in the twenties, for example, the young Max Horkheimer (who together with Theodor Adorno led the activities of the institute from the end of the twenties) writes in glowing terms of Soviet Russia. The avowed aim of the School was to utilise the Marxist analysis of capitalist society as the basis for a new form of independent social research, and in its first decade of existence the School established a close working relationship with the Marx-Engels Institute run by David Rjasanov in Moscow.

Shaken and forced into exile by the fascist take-over in 1933, the initial close links between the Frankfurt Institute and Moscow soured and were eventually broken by the rise of Stalinism inside the Soviet Union. Leaders of the Frankfurt School were well aware of what was happening in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1930s. In correspondence a leading member of the School, Leo Löwenthal, described the persecutions of opposition forces taking place inside the Soviet Union as "a great trauma for us". Another leading figure, Erich Fromm, also exchanged letters with Horkheimer detailing the legal and political perversions entailed in the Moscow trials.

Like many left-wing German intellectuals exiled by fascism, the reaction on the part of members of the Frankfurt School was to keep quiet about the crimes of Stalinism in the thirties. Adorno, for example, advocated silence. Fearing accusations of being "apologists for imperialist war" Adorno advised: "at the moment the most loyal position is to keep quiet." In another letter to Horkheimer, he pleads that the group should "keep discipline and publish nothing which could lead to Russia being

harmed." (Correspondence *Kritische* available in *und historische Praxis* by Olaf Asbach, Peter Lang GmbH, 1997). Under the most difficult of conditions during the thirties and the Second World War—persecuted from all sides, by the fascists, Stalinists and bourgeois governments—it was the forces of the Fourth International alone which fought to rearm the working class movement on the basis of an historical and materialist understanding of fascism and Stalinism.

In an interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine published towards the end of his life, Max Horkheimer concedes that he was already distancing himself from Marxism during the Second World War. The combined experiences of the fascist taking of power in Germany and the abominations of the Stalinist show trials in the Soviet Union led him to jettison any attachment to revolutionary Marxism and the working class as a force for change.

The increasing abandonment of Marx was accompanied by a growing interest by members of the Frankfurt School in the work of Nietzsche. Max Horkheimer commented favourably on Nietzsche in 1937: "The independence that is expressed in his philosophy, the freedom from enslaving ideological powers is the root of his thought." Aschheim's comment accompanying the quote is interesting: "Such critical independence was crucial for a Marxism minus a proletariat in which theory itself becomes practice."

Horkheimer and Adorno's increasing interest in Nietzsche is most evident in their joint work *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, first published after the Second World War in 1947. The book's argumentation is dense and complex, but in the course of their argument the two authors introduce the work of both Nietzsche and the Marquise de Sade to cast doubt on Enlightenment thought and the concept of progress. Horkheimer and Adorno's treatment of Nietzsche is characterised by critical ambivalence, but in certain passages they come to shared conclusions: "Enlightenment is totalitarian" they write and declare that the Enlightenment has led to a disaster ... the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."

In the positions outlined in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* it is possible to detect the seeds which were to blossom 20 years later into Horkheimer's open advocacy of Nietzsche as a greater thinker than Marx.[2]

In fact the current revival of interest in Nietzsche's thought is intimately bound up with the betrayals of Stalinism in the twentieth century and the subsequent turn away by a generation of intellectuals from the progressive ideals embodied in the Enlightenment and the socialist movement. For leading members of the German Frankfurt School the embrace of aspects of Nietzsche's thought was crucial in distancing themselves from their initial attachment to Marxism. In other European countries the post-war rehabilitation of Nietzsche took place either directly inside or on the fringes of Stalinist parties.

Perhaps the single most important figure in this respect is the Italian historian Mazzino Montinari. Montinari dedicated years of his life to research in the Nietzsche archive in Weimar and wrote a number of sanitised essays and books on Nietzsche as well as producing what is regarded by many as the definitive edition of Nietzsche's works. At the beginning of the sixties Montinari was editor of the Italian Communist Party's central theoretical organ *Rinascita*, and he remained a member of the party until the end of his life.

### **Post-structuralism and post-modernism**

In post-war France it is possible to chart quite precisely the process whereby Nietzsche displaced Marx amongst layers of left-oriented intellectuals and in the universities. Despite the crude abuse of Marx's work at the hands of his Stalinist interpreters, it was still impossible to openly attack Marx from the left in France in the 1960s. Instead, at that time, a campaign developed to discredit the role of Hegel and the Hegelian dialectic in Marx's work. In this respect the main weapon for those seeking to revise Marxism was the turn to Nietzsche.[3]

For a number of decades after the Second World War Nietzsche had been studied mainly as a secondary figure in association with Martin Heidegger—himself one of the principal influences for philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his elaboration of existentialist thought. A supporter of Nietzschean thought, Alan White writes: “Until the 1960s, Nietzsche was generally read as ... an advocate of power politics, devoted to producing supermen who would rule the world. Since the early 1970s this reading ... has been countered, initially in France, by an impressive array of thinkers who have seen Nietzsche's works as undermining the very possibility of the communication, indeed even of the possession of unambiguously determinable teachings.”

In fact the French revival of interest in Nietzsche began with a book by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962). In his advocacy of Nietzsche's thought Deleuze made no secret that his real target was Hegel and the dialectic. He writes: “Any compromise between Hegel and Nietzsche is excluded.” And further: “Nietzsche's philosophy, which embodies enormous polemical range, is from its form absolutely non-dialectical”. The campaign to rehabilitate Nietzsche in France swiftly gathered momentum.

In his essay *Nietzsche's French Moment* Vincent Descombes locates the Nietzsche colloquium held at Royaumont held July 4-8, 1964 as a turning point in the Nietzsche revival in France. One of the principal lectures was given by Michael Foucault who, in his contribution, sought to establish common ground between Marx, Sigmund Freud and Nietzsche.

Foucault (1926-84) began his academic career as a philosopher, studying with Jean Hyppolite and Louis Althusser at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (where Sartre also taught). For a period Foucault was a member of the French Communist Party until leaving in 1951. Despite his organisational break with the party, the vulgarised version of Marxism encouraged by French Stalinism (and its leading ideologue in the sixties, Louis Althusser) was part of the air breathed by Foucault and other students at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* for many decades.

Foucault's mentor Louis Althusser was the first significant theorist to begin a systematic attack on the Hegelian dialectic from inside the French Communist Party. In a number of works published in the 1960s (*For Marx, Reading Capital*) Althusser maintained that in his mature writings (especially *Das Capital*) Marx had broken completely with Hegel. Althusser also directly attacked the heart of historical materialism emphasising the role of what he termed “structures” in social and political development as opposed to the classical Marxist emphasis on the leading role of economic forces.

Michael Foucault is the essential bridge from Althusser's radically revised Marxism (structuralism) to the open hostility to Marxism and Enlightenment thought embodied in the post-modernist movement. Foucault drew from the essence of Nietzsche's ideology: his denial of objective truth (“There are no facts, only interpretations”—*Will to Power*); his denial of a knowable material world in favour of relativism (“That a judgement be false is not, in our opinion, an objection against that judgement.”—*Beyond Good and Evil*); and finally Nietzsche's opposition to Hegel and an all-embracing world view of historical development.

For Foucault the objective world is not a world of facts which can be objectively probed and studied; instead Foucault's world consists of discourses, stories—interpretations lacking any secure means of determining which “discourse” is superior. At the same time Foucault elevates difference and the specific: “the amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular and local criticism” above the “inhibiting effect of global, *totalitarian theories*.” The latter category, according to Foucault, naturally includes socialism. Foucault's admonition here against “totalitarianism” is later transformed into a battle cry in favour of individual self-interest and identity politics by one of the leading figures of the post-modernist movement, Jean-Francois Lyotard: “Let us wage war on totality, let us be witnesses of the unrepresentable, let us activate the

differences.”

It is not possible here to dwell on all the aspects and repercussions of the post-modernist espousal of Nietzsche—to illustrate the all affinities between much modern French thought and Nietzsche's heritage requires a book on its own.[4] Nevertheless it is in the writings of the post-structuralists (Foucault ) and post-modernists that the essence of Nietzsche's work—his determined attempt to reverse the progressive gains and ideals of the Enlightenment—is most graphically expressed.

### Concluding remarks

In the course of this brief study I have sought to elaborate the principal strands in the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche and identify some of the dynamic social processes which have led to an increase of interest in his work in the twentieth century. There was always a conservative lobby in Germany (Spengler, Juenger, Heidegger) who embraced Nietzsche as their own. But Nietzsche also influenced sections of the liberal intelligentsia. In early German social democracy Nietzsche's work provided a fundus for utopian and anarchist forces opposed to the socialist project of the SPD. For the despairing intellectuals of the Frankfurt school, impaled on the one side by fascism on the other by Stalinism, Nietzsche's philosophy was an important factor in de-coupling themselves from a socialist perspective.

For their part the post-modernists have gone to the core of Nietzsche's philosophy to undertake a full-scale assault on socialism and progressive thought as a whole. They stand full square with their mentor as he splutters out his objection to Enlightenment thought: “Ecrasez L'infame!”

In its own way the revival of Nietzsche and his thought in a number of countries at the start of a new century is one of the clearest indications of a prevailing social and ideological crisis which has its roots in a series of reverses for the working class and socialist movement in the twentieth century. Based upon the discrediting of genuine socialism by Stalinism, ideologues and apologists for modern capitalism use Nietzsche to demonstrate that inhumane exploitation, militarism and cynicism in the realm of culture are the natural order of things.[5] Disenchanted ex-radicals and university hacks ransack Nietzsche to demonstrate that systematic scientific thought, a world view based on rationality and progress, is unattainable—even undesirable. But, in fact, to combat a revival of interest in the ideals of progress and the renewal of socialist and egalitarian ideas, the advocates of the free market can find no better role model than the rather sad figure of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The advocate of the “over-man” soaring above the menial “rabble”, the patron of war and the martial spirit ended his days as a mumbling idiot unable to control his bodily functions, manipulated by a sister whom he despised. In a certain respect Nietzsche's tragic end is itself a metaphor expressing the sheer impossibility of any attempt to reduce and contract the rich and powerful heritage of classical and Enlightenment thought into a strait-jacket for the revival of myth, the Aryan spirit and aristocratic elitism.

### Notes:

1. Worthwhile studies of the Frankfurt School include:

Rolf Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School—Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, MIT, 1994; and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, University of California Press, 1973

2. Another leading theorist associated with the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, also paid his own tribute to the “liberating air of Nietzsche's thought cutting into Law and Order” (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1966).

3. For additional material on the relations between post-modernism and French Stalinism see my recent review of *Intellectual Impostures* [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jul2000/post-j01.shtml>].

4. One study which deals with the historical passage of Nietzsche's philosophy in France is Jacques Le Rider's *Nietzsche in France* (available in French and German).

5. The chief protagonist of post-modernism and advocate of Nietzsche's thought in America is the intellectual Richard Rorty who, in an interview with the British Guardian newspaper, declared: "Complex societies cannot reproduce themselves unless they retain the logic of a market economy. Left-wing intellectuals need time to readjust psychologically and terminologically to enable them to realise that there is no alternative to capitalism."

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**<http://www.wsws.org>**