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**“The Tyranny of the Least and the Dumbest”:**

**Nietzsche’s Critique of Socialism**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, several political theorists have attempted to enlist Nietzsche in their egalitarian political projects. The result has been a “domesticated” Nietzsche who can be counted as an ally in progressive politics. In this essay, I combat this appropriation of Nietzsche by offering a detailed reconstruction of his critique of socialism. Through an analysis of Nietzsche’s views on the intellectual forerunners, immediate causes, psychological assumptions, and errors of socialism, I hope restore his place as an important critic of egalitarian ideals. I contend Nietzsche’s rejection of socialism is rooted in two basic claims. First, he loathed the “idealism” of socialists – the illusion that the right “social combination” could bring about heaven on earth. Second, he viewed socialism as a particularly repugnant manifestation of the “pessimism of indignation” – a psychological “sickness” that afflicts individuals who are unwilling to accept responsibility for their own wretchedness. I conclude that we would do well to restore Nietzsche’s status as an important critic, not ally, of egalitarian politics.

**Note:** The following abbreviations will be used for Nietzsche’s works. References are to note or aphorism number rather than page number:

WP = *Will to Power*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968)

BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003)

OGM = *On the Genealogy of Morals*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

AC = *The Antichrist*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000)

GS = *The Gay Science*, (New York: Vintage, 1974)

EH *Ecce Homo*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992)

TI *Twilight of the Idols*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)

## I. Introduction

In recent years, it has become fashionable to contend that Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas can be squared with egalitarian political projects, (Warren 1985; Connolly 1991; Honig 1993; Hatab 1995; Coles 1996). Against those who have attempted to force Nietzsche into the social democratic tent, this paper is an attempt to reestablish his place as one of the most trenchant critics of many values that are ascendant in the contemporary political theory. Although Nietzsche was critical of many moral and political doctrines, few raised his ire quite as much as socialism. When discussing socialism, his tone became even more acerbic than usual. In *Will to Power*, he contends "the socialists' conception of the highest society is the lowest in the order of rank" and he describes the doctrine as "the logical conclusion of the *tyranny* of the least and dumbest" (WP 51 and 125). In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche writes: "Whom do I hate most among the rabble today? The socialist rabble..." (AC 57). Against those who have attempted to "domesticate" Nietzsche so he can be read as supportive of socialism, in this essay I argue that he is better read as an important critic of progressive ideals. Rather than dismissing his political criticisms as the half-baked musings of a thinker who "misunderstood essential features of modern society" such as the market and bureaucracy or turning "his philosophy" against "his politics" in order to move him closer to egalitarianism, we would do well to take his critique of social democratic values seriously, (Warren 1985).

In this essay, I do not take on any one particular progressive interpretation in detail. Instead, I focus my attention on Nietzsche himself. By offering a careful reconstruction of his understanding of the origins and nature of socialism as well as his

objections to it, I hope to contribute to the ongoing debate about his relevance as a political theorist. A brief word must be said, however, on the ideas of those who wish to “domesticate” Nietzsche. As Romand Coles has pointed out, no serious political theorist thinks Nietzsche was “secretly a radical” (Coles 1996). But Coles and others have used Nietzsche’s ideas as support for their egalitarian projects. Coles, for example, relies on an “idiosyncratic reading of Nietzsche’s gift-giving virtue” as a basis for an “ethic of receptive generosity” that can serve to sustain ethically desirable coalition politics (Coles 1996). Similarly, Lawrence Hatab has argued that even if we accept Nietzsche’s repudiation of human equality, rational subjectivity, and natural rights, we can still use his ideas to ground a new understanding of democratic politics (Hatab 1995).

Whatever the merit of these projects in their own right, they are problematic from an interpretive perspective because they tend to distort our understanding of Nietzsche’s political philosophy. Although the loose interpretation and appropriation of ideas can be useful polemically, it can serve to distract from the important task of seeking to understand a thinker on his or her own terms. My task in this paper is to bring attention back to Nietzsche’s ideas and it is my hope that this careful reconstruction of those ideas can restore his status as a gadfly, not ally, of progressive politics.

In what follows, I explore four aspects of his interrogation of socialism. First, in Part II, I explore what Nietzsche identified as the strands of thought that provided the basis for socialist doctrine – namely, Christianity and the moral perfectionism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and “the eighteenth century.” This genealogy is necessary because it allows us to see what Nietzsche understood to be the “moral foundations” of socialism.

Second, in Part III, I investigate Nietzsche's explanations of the "birth of socialism." Whereas Part II is more concerned with long-term genealogical origins, Part III brings into focus what Nietzsche took to be the more immediate causes of the emergence of socialism. This part of the paper explores Nietzsche's thoughts on the relationship between the ruling class in industrial society (manufacturers, entrepreneurs, etc.) and the working class as well as the role of political agitators in bringing about the rise of socialism.

Third, in Part IV, I investigate the core elements of Nietzsche's critique of socialism as a moral and political ideal. This portion of the paper is subdivided into two lines of critique. First, I discuss Nietzsche's condemnation of socialism as a manifestation of Rousseauian moral perfectionism. This allows me to return to Nietzsche's discussion of the eighteenth century in so far as it carries over into his assessment of socialism. Next, I discuss Nietzsche's rejection of socialism as a particularly "unhealthy" manifestation of the politics of *ressentiment*. This discussion calls attention to the central piece of Nietzsche's psychological diagnosis of socialists: the pessimism of indignation.

While Parts II, III, and IV are primarily exercises in "originative" interpretation, in Part V, I explore a question that is more "classificatory" in nature. Although it would be hypocritical for me to attempt to "appropriate" Nietzsche in a way that makes him more palatable for contemporary readers, I think it is worthwhile to consider whether or not his critique of socialism is similar to the arguments of other thinkers. This exercise will be an attempt to determine if it is possible to "situate" Nietzsche's evaluation and rejection of socialism among the critiques that have been offered by other thinkers and/or

schools of thought. After rejecting various possibilities, I argue that although Nietzsche's critique of socialism is unique when taken as a whole, various aspects can be situated among other thinkers and systems of thought. First, I contend that Nietzsche's critique of the socialist conception of human nature anticipates Sigmund Freud's suspicion of communism as he saw it developing in the early years of the Soviet Union. Second, I argue that Nietzsche's critique of socialist *idealism* anticipates Michael Oakeshott's skepticism of "rationalism in politics." I intend for these classificatory conclusions to be modest. My aim is not to make any grand pronouncements about where Nietzsche fits on the ideological spectrum. Instead, I want to suggest two interesting parallels between his critique of socialism and those offered by two other important thinkers.

In Part VI, I conclude the essay with some thoughts on the enduring relevance of Nietzsche as a political thinker. I argue that students of normative political theory and ideology would do well to remember Nietzsche as an important critic of the "politics of equality" that dominates our age. While I have chosen Nietzsche's critique of socialism as the subject of this analysis, he also offered harsh criticisms of democracy and liberalism. Rather than writing off Nietzsche's politics as the product of a flawed understanding of "modern society" or as unimportant footnotes in his philosophical project, we should take them seriously. This recovery of his invective against socialism is an attempt to do just that.

## **II. The Forerunners of Socialism**

For Nietzsche, genealogy was an essential component of any critical project. It is appropriate, then, to begin this exploration with a consideration of what he identified as

the intellectual “ancestors” of socialist doctrine. As noted above, Nietzsche thought the socialist ideal represented the “residue of Christianity and Rousseau in the de-Christianized world” (WP 1017). In what follows, I point out the key contributions Nietzsche believed Christian and Rousseauian thought made to later socialist thought. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that one could begin this genealogy prior to the emergence of Christianity with a discussion of Socrates and Plato. As such, a brief word on their relevance is appropriate.

Socialism is another in a long line of “idealist” systems that are, on Nietzsche’s view, inherently flawed. Idealists, in short, reject *this* world and embrace another. The “mischief” of idealism began with Socrates and Plato, who created a “world of Truth,” or realm of Being, and in so doing brought about a “denaturalization of moral values.” As you will see below, this move is problematic for Nietzsche for many reasons. For now, it will suffice to say he believed that “overthrowing” other-worldly ideals was central to his “craft.” Idealism, in his view, “deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness” and, as such, “Socrates represents a moment of the profoundest perversity in the history of values” (EH 2 and WP 430).

### *The Grandfather of Socialist Thought: Christianity*

Although much could be said about the relationship between Christianity and socialism, I will limit my consideration to two major points of contribution. First, I discuss the relationship between Christian and socialist *idealism*. This will include brief reflections on the striking parallels Nietzsche sees in the Christian and socialist rejection of *this* world. Second, I explore the socialist adoption of the Christian idea of “the

equality of souls before God.” I will conclude this section with an exploration of why Nietzsche thought the socialist ideal represents “nothing but a clumsy misunderstanding of [the] Christian moral ideal” (WP 340).

First, Nietzsche identifies Christianity as an idealist philosophy that, like Platonism, rejects this world for another. While Socrates and Plato contended that the realm of the Forms, or the “World of Being,” is what really matters, Christians emphasize the importance of an eternal “Kingdom of Heaven” for believers (WP 161). In both cases, it is worth noting that “Bliss” is not necessarily something that can be achieved through a transformation of *this* world. Rather, both Plato and Jesus can be interpreted as offering *individuals* a philosophy of life that they can establish *within themselves*. The essential point for Nietzsche is this: the Christian, in typical idealist fashion, “condemns, disparages, [and] curses the ‘world’” (WP 373).

According to Nietzsche, Christ’s emphasis on personal transformation was not shared by St. Paul. Whereas “primitive Christianity” is, on Nietzsche’s reading, “possible as the most *private* form of existence,” the Christianity of St. Paul is much more *public* and, thus, more like a political doctrine (WP 211). Once we begin to view Christianity as a social doctrine instead of a personal one, we can see how it can be read as a forerunner to socialism.

Nietzsche saw the Christian slave revolt in morality as quite similar to later political revolutions. Christianity offers the “poor and lowly” a “gateway to happiness” and, for Nietzsche, “to this extent the rise of Christianity is nothing more than the *typical socialist doctrine*.” The things of this world that the gospel passes judgment upon –

“property, gain, fatherland, rank and status, tribunals, police, state, church, education, art, the army” – are “all typical of the socialist doctrine” (WP 209).

The second foundational contribution of Christianity to the socialist doctrine is the idea of “equality of souls before God.” It is important to point out that Nietzsche is not arguing that socialists accept the tenets of Christianity as a matter of faith. Rather, like so many political actors throughout history, he thinks socialists are adept at using Christian ideas for their own purposes: “The socialists appeal to the Christian instincts; that is their most subtle piece of shrewdness” (WP 765). In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche calls the “equality of souls before God” the “*pretext* for the rancor of all base-minded, this explosive of a concept which eventually became revolution, modern idea, and the principle of decline of the whole order of society” (AC 162). Nietzsche traces the warpath of this idea quite explicitly in *Will to Power*: “mankind was first taught to stammer the proposition of equality in a religious context, and only later was it made into morality: no wonder that man ended by taking it seriously, taking it practically! – that is to say, politically, democratically, socialistically...” (WP 762).

With these two foundational contributions – the rejection of this world and the equality of all souls – established, we can now turn to consider why it is that Nietzsche concludes the socialist ideal is “nothing but a clumsy *misunderstanding* of [the] Christian moral ideal.” While it is true that Nietzsche identified socialism and other “progressive” theories as “cults of Christian morality under a new name,” he thought that they fundamentally misunderstood Christianity (WP 340). What was it that he thought the socialists misunderstood about the Christian moral ideal? These doctrines represent misunderstandings of the Christian moral ideal because they transfer “the arrival of the

‘kingdom of God’ into the future, on earth, in human form...” (WP 339). In Nietzsche’s mind, the emergence of socialism and similar theories can, in part, be contributed to the “death of God.” Without the hope of glory in the next world, socialists and others seek to transform *this* one (WP 340). The emergence of the socialist ideal is, in Nietzsche’s mind, part of our payment “for having been Christians for two thousand years” (WP 30). For the complete development of the doctrine of this-worldly transformation, though, we must turn away from the Christians and to the philosopher who Nietzsche identified as the bridge between Platonic-Christian idealism and the socialist idealism of the nineteenth century – Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

*The Grandmother of Socialist Thought: Jean-Jacques Rousseau & the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*

The thought of Rousseau and the eighteenth century provides an essential link between the “other-worldliness” of Christianity and the “this-worldliness” of socialism. According to Nietzsche, Rousseau was a dreamer, the representative figure of a century “dominated by woman, given to enthusiasm, full of *spirit*, shallow but with a spirit in the service of what is desirable, of the heart...intoxicated, cheerful, clear, humane, false before itself, much *canaille au fond*, sociable” (WP 95). This spirit animated an age of ideology in which wild-eyed idealists felt it was in their power to begin the world anew.

What separates Rousseau from the Christian tradition is his idealization of human nature and his faith in the transformative power of human institutions. Needless to say, these two ideas are inextricably intertwined. For Rousseau, man’s nature is essentially good, but he was corrupted by various “advances” in human civilization (especially the institution of private property). Although man’s natural “innocence” has been lost,

Rousseau thought that it could be replaced by a new form of moral goodness through the establishment of new political institutions. When we compare this to St. Augustine, we can see what a departure this is from the mainstream of Pauline Christianity. Augustine held that man is inescapably sinful and concludes that, as such, the City of God cannot be achieved on earth. Rousseau's major contribution to the foundation of socialist thought is in his rejection of human sinfulness and his commitment to human improvement through institutional change. With this foundational belief, he set the stage for perfectionist political doctrines that moved focus from "the next world" of Christianity by arguing that *this* world can be transformed into "heaven on earth."

### **III. The Birth of Socialism**

In Nietzsche's mind, the emergence of socialism as a moral and political ideal can be traced back to the Christian rejection of this world and the moral perfectionism of Rousseau and other eighteenth century thinkers. In addition to these long-term factors, Nietzsche thought there were more immediate reasons for socialist challenges to the economic and political hierarchy. First, Nietzsche thought the "socialist rabble" (political agitators) contributed to unrest by convincing workers that they should be dissatisfied with their lot in life. Second, Nietzsche believed that the ruling class in industrial culture – capitalists – "lacked noble manners" and, as such, did not command sufficient respect from the working class. In Nietzsche's mind, these two factors played off one another and created the conditions necessary for revolutionary thought and action.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche argues that "ordinary human beings," especially workers, "exist for service and the general advantage and...*may* exist only for

that” (BGE 61). This is necessary because, as Nietzsche declares in *The Antichrist*, a “high culture is a pyramid: it can stand only on a broad base; its first presupposition is a strong and soundly consolidated mediocrity.... To be a public utility, a wheel, a function, for that one must be destined by nature...” (AC 57). This is not necessarily to say that workers are mindless slaves that get nothing out of their existence. Rather, their service is “the only kind of *happiness* of which the great majority are capable” (AC 57). In short, “for the mediocre, to be mediocre is their happiness; mastery of one thing, specialization – a natural instinct” (AC 57). Beyond the happiness attained in performing his particular task well, the workers also receive comfort in religion which

gives an inestimable contentment with their situation and type, manifold peace of the heart, an ennobling of obedience, one further happiness and sorrow with their peers and something transfiguring and beautifying, something of a justification for the whole everyday character, the whole lowliness, the whole half-brutish poverty of their souls.... Perhaps nothing in Christianity or Buddhism is as venerable as their art of teaching even the lowliest how to place themselves through piety in an illusory higher order of things and thus to maintain their contentment with the real order, in which their life is hard enough – and precisely this hardness is necessary, (BGE 61).

Here we have part of Nietzsche’s “naturalist” defense of aristocracy. In sum, he believes the worker is *naturally* suited for a simple, specialized existence in which he can find happiness in his role and comfort in the assurances of religion.

A machine-like “high culture” can be interrupted by many things, but in what follows, I will focus on two: the propaganda of “socialist rabble” and the lack of noble

manners of industrial leaders. As noted above, the smooth operation of a hierarchal society depends upon the contentment of the various classes. In Nietzsche's view, workers can and "should" (in a naturalistic sense) be content with their lot in life. But this contentment is disrupted by the "socialist rabble":

Whom do I hate most among the rabble 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, (AC 57).

Nietzsche views the socialist rabble as the priests of a new slave revolt and the workers as the herd that is waiting to be led by their noses. The propaganda of the socialist rabble causes the worker to become dissatisfied by his lot in life and he begins to ask questions. One of the first might be something like: why should "the boss" have a life that is so much more comfortable than my own? This brings us to the problem of noble manners.

According to Nietzsche, the propaganda of the socialist rabble is not, by itself, sufficient to bring about worker revolt. This is because the recognition that you are "lower" than someone else is not, *prima facie*, a cause for discontent. What matters is not that you are in a subordinate position, but *who* you are subordinate to: "For at bottom the masses are willing to submit to slavery of any kind if only the higher-ups constantly legitimize themselves as higher, as *born* to command – by having noble manners." In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche explains the importance of "noble manners":

Oddly, submission to powerful, frightening, even terrible persons, like tyrants and generals, is not experienced as nearly so painful as is [the] submission to

unknown and uninteresting persons, which is what all the luminaries of industry are. What the workers see in the employer is usually only a cunning, bloodsucking dog of a man who speculates on all misery; and the employer's name, shape, manner and reputation are a matter of complete indifference to them. The manufacturers and entrepreneurs of business probably have been too deficient so far in all those forms and signs of a *higher race* that alone make a *person* interesting. If the nobility of birth showed in their eyes and gestures, there might not be any socialism of the masses, (GS 40).

Due to the fact that the “luminaries of industry” lack noble manners, the workers get “the idea that is only accident and luck that have elevated one person above another...and thus socialism is born” (GS 40). The idea of *natural* hierarchy is undermined by those who fail to exhibit the qualities appropriate to their “caste” and, thus, the arguments of the socialist rabble begin to seem more plausible to the worker.

In *Will to Power*, Nietzsche makes a similar argument in a discussion of the emergence of Christianity: “The degeneration of the rulers and the ruling classes has been the cause of the greatest mischief in history! Without the Roman Caesars and Roman society, the insanity of Christianity would never have come to power” (WP 874). The base of the great cultural pyramid is not blind, deaf, and dumb. Rather the base will only remain content as the base if it believes the structure it is supporting is *worthy* of its service. The “higher-ups” must “constantly legitimize themselves as higher” or the base will erode.

We can now see how, according to Nietzsche, the two immediate causes of the birth of socialism play off one another. The socialist rabble tells the worker that he

should demand more from the higher-ups and the capitalist cannot justify his own status and, thus, begins ceding ground to the lower class. The ruling class grants the worker the right to organize, the right to vote, and the right to serve in the military while at the same time trying to keep him in a position of economic subordination. Nietzsche's sees these concessions as further evidence of the lack of noble manners: "If one wants slaves, then one is a fool if one educates them to be masters" (TI 40).

One may object that Nietzsche has not made clear which of these factors is primitive. In other words, does the socialist rabble cause the worker to question the existence of natural hierarchy or does the lack of noble manners of the luminaries of industry cause the creation of a socialist rabble in the first place? This is a question that has been debated by socialist theorists and others for a century and a half. Is there a primary source of class consciousness? More basically, is there such a thing as *class* consciousness? Can class consciousness be accelerated by a "vanguard elite"? I will try to provide an interpretation of Nietzsche's response to questions such as these in Part IV. What is important here is to note that Nietzsche identified *both* the propaganda of the socialist rabble *and* the lack of noble manners of the ruling classes as contributions to a fundamental change in worker consciousness. With Nietzsche's understanding of these two sources of the birth of socialism now established, we can turn to a more detailed account of the psychology behind the socialist ideal and consider Nietzsche's criticism of it.

#### **IV. Nietzsche's Critique of Socialism as an Ideal**

Nietzsche's critique of socialism can be divided into two major lines of argument. The first line is grounded in Nietzsche's identification of socialism as a Rousseauian perfectionist political theory. For Nietzsche, Rousseau and socialist thought represent forms of idealism that ought to be met with "suspicion and malice" because they promise what they cannot deliver and even if they could, their ideals are undesirable (WP 80). The primary source of their error lies in a flawed theory of human nature and an unjustified hope in the transformative power of institutions.

The second line of critique that Nietzsche offers is grounded in his identification of socialism as a political theory born of resentment and a desire for revenge. In Nietzsche's view, socialism is "an attack of sickness" brought about by "underprivileged" human beings who blame "society" for their "lack of power and self-confidence" (WP 125 and 373). In other words, socialism, like other forms of *ressentiment*, is a manifestation of the will to power of the "least and dumbest" members of society (WP 125).

#### *Nietzsche's Critique of Socialist Idealism*

As noted above, Nietzsche believed some of the roots of socialist thought could be traced back to the romantic idealism of Rousseau and the eighteenth century. For Nietzsche, the central tenets of romantic idealism included the idealization of man, the deification of nature, and a belief in the transformative power of institutions (WP 97). Nietzsche read Rousseau's political theory as "idealist," or perfectionist, insofar as it was grounded in the idea that man's natural goodness can be restored through the reformation of human institutions. Nietzsche believed socialists adopted this central aspect of

Rousseau's thought: "How ludicrous I find the socialists, with their nonsensical optimism concerning the 'good man,' who is waiting to appear from behind the scenes if only one would abolish the old 'order' and set all the 'natural drives' free" (WP 755).

Nietzsche objected to this form of idealism on several fronts. First, he contended that the idealism of Rousseau and the socialists condemned *necessary* parts of life and, as such, their aims were illusory at best, misleading at worst. "Waste, decay, elimination need not be condemned: they are *necessary* consequences of life, of the growth of life.... It is a disgrace for all socialist systematizers that they suppose there could be circumstances – social combinations – in which vice, disease, prostitution, distress would no longer grow. – But that means condemning life. – A society is not free to remain young.... Age is not abolished by means of institutions. Neither is disease. Nor vice" (WP 40). The socialist belief in perfect "social combinations" is what Nietzsche sarcastically calls a "gift from the eighteenth century" (WP 97). Indeed, socialism deviates from what Nietzsche identifies as the "progress of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth century" (WP 117). Consideration of this "progress" reveals the second aspect of Nietzsche's critique of socialist idealism.

In *Will to Power*, Nietzsche declares "we *good Europeans* wage a war against the eighteenth century" (WP 117). In addition to doubting the possibility of perfect "social combinations," Nietzsche was skeptical of the revolutionary character of the eighteenth century and the socialist movement. Against these radical dispositions, Nietzsche endorses the central characteristics of the "darker, more realistic, [and] stronger" nineteenth century: "more and more decisively anti-idealistic, more concrete, more fearless, industrious, moderate, suspicious against sudden changes, *antirevolutionary*"

(WP 102 and 117). According to Nietzsche, the basic outlook of the nineteenth century was altogether more *natural* than that of the eighteenth, the rhetoric of the latter notwithstanding. For Nietzsche, Rousseau's "return to nature" was a "dream" and true "progress toward 'naturalness'" requires the rejection of the romantic idealism of the eighteenth century. On Nietzsche's view, the source of error for Rousseau and the socialists is a flawed theory of human nature. It is to this faulty foundation that we must turn.

For Nietzsche, the French Revolution represented the "continuation of Christianity" and Rousseau was its "seducer" (WP 94). As noted above, the starting point of Rousseau's idealism is the forgetting of man's nature. Only by "cleaning the slate" of human nature can perfectionists like Rousseau promise to "begin the world anew." Utopia, Rousseau and the socialists tell us, can be realized by sweeping away the old "order" and replacing it with something kinder, gentler, and more humane. With these new institutions in place, man can recover his lost innocence and social harmony will follow.

Nietzsche thinks this is pure folly. Against this faith in the infinite malleability and perfectibility of human nature, Nietzsche offers a much more "realistic" view. In *Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes: "Not to know oneself: prudence of the idealist. The idealist: a creature that has good reasons to be in the dark about itself and is prudent enough to be in the dark about these reasons too" (WP 344). The act of *forgetting* is a *necessary* step in the idealist projects of Rousseau and the nineteenth century socialists. Only by forgetting what we know of ourselves can we place faith in the transformative

possibilities of “social combinations.” For Nietzsche, the idea of “perfecting” man through institutional change is impossible and, at bottom, undesirable.

In sum, Nietzsche’s critique of socialism as a form of idealism is grounded in his rejection of the perfectibility of human nature and the transformative power of human institutions. Unlike Rousseau and the socialists, Nietzsche is unwilling to forget man’s nature in order to assimilate him to an ideal. Rather, Nietzsche argues, the only ideal worth embracing is one that can be reconciled with *all* that nature has to offer, not the idealized, sanitized, and deified conception of nature offered by philosophers of the eighteenth century and the socialists of the nineteenth.

#### *Nietzsche’s Critique of Socialism as a Politics of Revenge*

In this section, I argue that the most important aspect of Nietzsche’s critique of socialism stems out of his identification of it as a politics of resentment and revenge. Further, I contend that the basis for this portion of Nietzsche’s critique is identical to that which we find at the foundation of his rejection of anti-Semitism. I conclude this section with a discussion of Nietzsche’s assessment of the psychology of socialism. In his discussions of socialism, Nietzsche uses several terms to describe *who* it is he is talking about: “socialist systematizers,” “socialist rabble,” “socialist workers,” etc. As noted above, this can make his appraisal of the *psychology* of socialism somewhat confusing. Does the “socialist worker” develop a sense of resentment on his own? If so, it is a result of his employer’s “lack of noble manners” or the worker’s own desire to hold someone responsible for his misery? Or is worker consciousness raised by an *external* force – what Nietzsche usually calls “the socialist rabble” – that convinces the worker that he is

oppressed and that he ought to rebel? If this second possibility rings true, it gives rise to a new set of questions. Are the socialist systematizers “true believers” who are genuinely committed to the ideals they are promoting? Or is socialist doctrine merely a *means* for these elites to maximize their own power? If the latter is true, then are the workers themselves a mere means of this elite – a group that has been “duped” by a small cadre of intellectuals on whose behalf they are being urged to revolt? In the concluding portion of this section, I will attempt to sort out some of these questions, but in the interceding paragraphs, assume that Nietzsche is using the term “socialist” to include *both* activists and workers.

Throughout his writings Nietzsche identifies socialists as “underprivileged” human beings. They believe themselves to be suffering and they seek to find the *cause* of their pain. Unlike Christians, who blame the entire world, *themselves included*, for their suffering, socialists are unwilling to blame themselves. Instead, socialists “condemn, slander, [and] besmirch *society*” (TI 34). They are, in Nietzsche’s words, the “apostles of revenge and *ressentiment*,” they seek to find someone responsible for their failure and to punish them.

Nietzsche labels this way of looking at the world the “pessimism of indignation.” It is manifest when an individual exclaims: “How can *I* help that I am wretched! But somebody must be responsible, *otherwise it would be unbearable!*” (WP 765). In the case of the socialist, responsibility is “discovered” in those who support and maintain the unjust political and economic hierarchies that exist in society. The socialist, then, seems to be saying: “I am wretched because ‘the system’ has made me so! If we overturn ‘the system’ and punish those who supported it, I will cease to be wretched.” Here we see the

connection between the idealism discussed above and the pessimism of indignation. In addition to finding someone to blame, the socialists also invent a blueprint for a new social order that could pull people out of a state of wretchedness.

It is useful to think of Nietzsche's rejection of socialism as structurally identical to his denunciation of anti-Semitism. The socialist and the anti-Semite are, in Nietzsche's mind, "birds of a feather" because each places a scapegoat at the center of his theory of justice: "[The underprivileged] need an appearance of justice, i.e., a theory through which they can shift responsibility for their existence, for being thus and thus, on to some sort of scapegoat. This scapegoat can be God – in Russia there is no lack of atheists from *ressentiment* – or the social order, or education and training, or the Jews, or the nobility, or those who have turned out well in any way" (WP 765). This is among the most powerful defenses of Nietzsche against the charge that he was an anti-Semite or proto-Nazi. It is clear that the common denominator that he loathes in socialism and anti-Semitism is each outlook's rejection of *personal* responsibility and manufacture of an explanation that blames others for their being "thus and thus." For Nietzsche, the fact that socialism and anti-Semitism differ in *who* they blame is beside the point. What matters is that each has identified as "evil...*precisely* the 'good man' of the other morality, precisely the noble, powerful man, the ruler, but dyed in another color, interpreted in another fashion, seen in another way by the venomous eye of *ressentiment*" (GM I: 11).

Nietzsche identifies the pessimism of indignation as a psychological disease that afflicts those who are unwilling to accept their "lot in life" and seek to blame others for their position. He contends that we ought to view socialists and others suffering from the

pessimism of indignation as “invalids who feel better for crying out, for whom defamation is a relief” (WP 373). In other words, socialist activism and agitation is, day-to-day, a form of catharsis for the underprivileged. “In short,” Nietzsche tells us, “the pessimism of indignation invents responsibility in order to create a *pleasant* feeling for itself” (WP 765). To the extent that socialists are “crying out” in order to soothe themselves, Nietzsche says “there is no reason for taking this clamor seriously” (WP 373 and TI 34). It is when this “crying out” builds up to the frenzy of revolutionary action that Nietzsche says we ought to express some concern.

Although Nietzsche sees day-to-day socialist agitation as relatively harmless, he warns that these miniature manifestations of revenge are but a prelude to what the socialist hopes will be the “last judgment”: revolution. Like his assessment of the French Revolution, Nietzsche’s sees the socialist hope for revolution as a desire to engage in the ultimate therapy for the pessimism of indignation. A socialist revolution would represent a “retrograde movement” in Nietzsche’s view of progress. It is for this reason that Nietzsche believes the existence of the socialist rabble can be “something useful and therapeutic” for “good Europeans”: “it forces the Europeans to retain spirit, namely cunning and cautious care, not to abjure manly and warlike virtues altogether, and to retain some remnant of spirit, of clarity, sobriety, and coldness of spirit – it protects Europe for the time being from the feminine withering that threatens it...[I]n socialism we see a thorn that protects against comfortableness” (WP 125 and 132). It should be noted that Nietzsche thought “a few great experiments” in socialism “might prove that in a socialist society life negates itself” and “hence such a practical instruction...would not strike me as undesirable, even if it were gained and paid for with a tremendous

expenditure of human lives” (WP 125). This is a negative version of the sort of human sacrifice Nietzsche praises as “going under.” In other words, the sacrifice of human lives for the cause of socialism could be “progressive” for mankind insofar as it helps us recognize ideals that should *not* be pursued. This provokes an obvious, but difficult question: why is the socialist ideal less worthwhile than Nietzsche’s own ideal?

Needless to say, this question points to a central difficulty in Nietzsche studies. If Nietzsche’s critique of idealism is a rejection of ideals qua ideals, why does he offer his own “ideal” of the overman? Although a full response to this question is beyond the scope of this essay, a brief reply is appropriate insofar as it illumines the reasons behind Nietzsche’s rejection of socialism. Against the interpretation of Nietzsche as an apolitical or anti-political thinker, I believe it is clear that he saw a strong relationship between his ideal of the overman and the socio-political systems that were in place. Perhaps the clearest statement of this connection is in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche writes:

We have a different faith: to us the democratic movement [of which socialism is a part] is not only a form of the decay of political organization but a form of the decay, namely the diminution, of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value.... The over-all *degeneration of man* down to what today appears to the socialist dolts and flatheads as their “man of the future” – as their ideal – this degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal, this animalization of man into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims, is *possible*, there is no doubt of it. Anyone who has once thought through this possibility to

the end knows one kind of nausea that other men don't know – but perhaps also a new *task!* (BGE 203)

Nietzsche saw himself as engaged in this “new task” of resisting the diminution of man into a “perfect herd animal” and positing a new understanding of progress. While it is true that Nietzsche wished to challenge desiderata and teleological views of man and history, he did believe human beings ought to serve as a bridge to a state of affairs in which better and stronger men could flourish.

Before proceeding to the next section, I must address the psychological questions raised above. It should be clear at this point that Nietzsche rejected the idealism and *ressentiment* of the socialist outlook. What is less than clear is whether or not Nietzsche provided a coherent explanation of the origins of socialist psychology. In other words, at times it seems as though Nietzsche believes socialist ideas originate *within* the minds of workers, which I will call the “internal explanation.” Even if we accept this as an accurate assessment of Nietzsche's position, there is still a question as to *why* socialist ideas take hold within the minds of workers. In some places, it seems they emerge because of the ruling class's “lack of noble manners.” In other places, it seems they surface because the worker is seeking an explanation for his suffering (the pessimism of indignation).

As if these questions are not difficult enough, there exists a separate category of possibilities, which I will call the “external explanation.” On this alternative reading, socialist ideas do not originate *within* the minds of individual workers, but rather they are created by an external group that wishes to use the workers as an instrument for their own will to power. Even if we accept this external explanation, there still exists the possibility

of a sub-division within it. We can ask if, perhaps, the socialist activists genuinely believe in the ideals they are promoting. Fortunately, this option does not require much consideration because it is clear Nietzsche rejected it. Idealists are, on Nietzsche's view, prudent enough to know that they have a better chance of gaining power if they operate under the banner of "For others" (WP 349).

Although I do not think Nietzsche left us with a completely coherent response to these questions, I think the external explanation was the most compelling in his mind. The strongest case for the external explanation can be found in *The Antichrist*. It is there where Nietzsche blames the "socialist rabble" for undermining the sense of satisfaction that a worker is able to get out of his life. It is the socialist rabble "who *makes him* envious, who *teach him* revenge" (AC 57). The seeds of discontent, then, seem to be planted within the worker by an external source. It is at this point that the substance of socialist psychology becomes relevant. The socialist rabble tells the worker that he ought to demand more from society. "Why," the once-content worker may ask, should I be subject to constant struggle while my boss enjoys such material comfort?" The response of the socialist rabble might be:

Look at your boss, that bloodsucking dog of a man! He sits in his office getting fat while you slave away in the factory! He is capitalizing on your misery. Is that fair? Is that just? He is the cause of your suffering and it is due time that we rid ourselves of the system that has allowed him to victimize you all of these years! We can institute a system built on fairness and equality rather than exploitation and inequality. WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE!

As noted above, the socialist rabble constitutes the priestly caste of this modern manifestation of slave morality. The ruling class's lack of noble manners and the suffering of *this* world provide these new priests with the ammunition they need to win the hearts and minds of the benighted among them.

According to Nietzsche, the socialist rabble does not truly have the interests of the working class at heart. Rather, this "cult of altruism" is nothing but a "disguised form of the will to power;" it is, in Nietzsche's words, "a specific form of egoism that regularly appears under certain physiological conditions" (WP 766 and 373). For Nietzsche, the idea of collective (or herd) aims is one of the great illusions of social life and socialism is one of the most covert forms of it.

Socialism is merely a means of agitation employed by individualism: it grasps that, to attain anything, one must organize oneself to a collective action, to a 'power.' But what it desires is not a social order as the goal of the individual but a social order as a means for making possible many individuals: this is the instinct of socialists about which they frequently deceive themselves (- apart from the fact that, in order to prevail, they frequently *have* to deceive themselves). The preaching of altruistic morality in the service of individual egoism: one of the most common lies of the nineteenth century (WP 784).

It seems that, on Nietzsche's view, socialists recognize that the "herd is a means" by which one can attain power for himself (WP 766). In sum, Nietzsche would not have been surprised by the power accrued by later "vanguard elites" under the banner of "for others."

## V. “Situating” Nietzsche’s Critique of Socialism

Is it possible to situate Nietzsche’s rejection of socialism among the many critiques that have been offered over the course of the last century? Because his assessment emerged out of his complex and unique philosophical system, it is clear that, taken as a whole, his repudiation of socialism stands alone. If we break his critique down into its component parts, however, different ideas can be situated among later criticisms of socialism. While there are myriad similarities and parallels that could be discussed, I limit my discussion to two. First, as noted above, I discuss the similarity between Nietzsche and Freud’s rejection of the socialist conception of human nature. Second, I argue that Nietzsche’s “mistrust [of] all systematizers” and disdain for the idealism of socialists is reminiscent of Michael Oakeshott’s skeptical conservatism. Before proceeding to these areas of possible agreement, a brief word must be said on where Nietzsche’s critique of socialism should not be situated.

### *Where Nietzsche’s Critique Does Not Fit*

At one time in the history of Nietzsche studies, it would have been natural to try to situate his critique of socialism within fascist doctrine. I think it is clear, however, that this is a mismatch. For fascists, socialism was problematic because it “confines the movement of history within the class struggle and ignores the unity of classes established in one economic and moral reality in the State” (Mussolini 2001, 300). From the fascist perspective, the only aim that matters is the aim of the State as an organic, moral entity.

As such, it opposes both socialism and liberalism for emphasizing class and individual respectively.

This critique of socialism cannot be reconciled with Nietzsche's. First, Nietzsche contended that a state, contrary to the fascist claim that it is an organic entity with a quasi-mystical, moral purpose, has no natural aim. Second, and most importantly, Nietzsche adamantly opposed nationalist beliefs in a "folk soul." As noted above, Nietzsche thought it was a "basic error" to think of "collective" wills. Rather, he instructs us to view the will as residing in individuals and to view collectivities as means to the exercise of the will to power.

A second place where Nietzsche's arguments should not be situated is along side liberal critiques of socialism. I make this claim with two caveats. First, while Nietzsche did oppose acquisitiveness as a philosophy of life, he saw it as *part of* a healthy existence. In *Will to Power*, he writes that the desire to possess things is "the oldest and healthiest of all instincts." He even goes on to add that the desire to possess more than one already has is "the doctrine preached by life itself to all that is life" (WP 126). This naturalistic defense of acquisitiveness is *limited* insofar as Nietzsche rejects it as a philosophy of life because it has no aim. This provides the basis for Nietzsche's critique of nineteenth century liberal Herbert Spencer, who offered what Nietzsche called a "shopkeeper's philosophy" that was deficient due to the "complete absence of an ideal, except that of the mediocre man" (WP 382).

The second caveat is that a case can be made that twentieth century libertarians have adopted part of Nietzsche's critique of socialism. More specifically, Ayn Rand followed Nietzsche in identifying socialism as a covert form of egoism. Although we can

only take this connection so far, it is worth noting that some libertarians have adopted this interpretation of socialist psychology.

With those two caveats on the table, I think it would be unfair to situate Nietzsche's critique of socialism with the liberals for two major reasons. First, unlike most liberals, it does not appear that Nietzsche offered any sort of deontological or utilitarian defense of market economics against the socialist challenge. Second, Nietzsche rejected the liberal conceptions of liberty and equality throughout his writings and these commitments are central to most liberal critiques of socialism (see, e.g., WP 861, 872, and 936; TI 38).

#### *Situating Nietzsche's View of Human Nature with Freud*

In their assessments of socialism, the fundamental point of agreement between Nietzsche and Freud is the conclusion that the doctrine rests on a flawed conception of human nature. Socialists, like the philosophers of the eighteenth century, "forget" human nature in order to assimilate men to their ideal. One of the central aspects of Nietzsche's belief that the nineteenth century had progressed from the eighteenth was that the former was much "darker, more realistic, [and] stronger" (WP 102). During the twentieth century, there were few thinkers that were "darker" and "more realistic" than Freud. When Freud turned his searing eye to socialism he saw a delusional philosophy in much the same way that Nietzsche did.

To Freud, the communists of the twentieth century were engaged in a perfectionist political project like that of the nineteenth century socialists Nietzsche was opposing. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud writes:

The communists believe that they have found the path to deliverance from our evils. According to them, man is wholly good and is well-disposed to his neighbor; but the institution of private property has corrupted his nature.... If private property were abolished, all wealth held in common, and everyone allowed to share in the enjoyment of it, ill-will and hostility would disappear among men.... But I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the [communist] system is based are an untenable illusion. In abolishing private property we deprive human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature. (Freud 1961, 70-71)

Freud, like Nietzsche, retained a deep suspicion of “social combinations” that promise to bring about “utopia.” Indeed, as we will see below, Freud and Nietzsche both identify the “solidarity” of the socialist movement *not* as a product of love, but rather as the result of the unifying power of a common enemy (a scapegoat).

The central flaw Freud identified in socialist doctrine was the idea that private property is the primary, if not the sole, source of man’s depravity. With this foundational idea, socialists were able to say that man could be redeemed if, and only if, the institution of private property were abolished and replaced by a kinder, more humane system. To take an extreme case, utopian socialist Robert Owen contended that since the “character is universally formed *for*, and not *by* the individual” the “adoption of [socialist] principles of truth...will enable mankind to *prevent*, in the rising generation, almost all of the evils and miseries which we and our forefathers have experienced” (Owen 2001, 199-200).

For Freud and Nietzsche alike, the idea that human beings are naturally good or blank slates and that their goodness can be recovered or created through the abolition of private property is sheer nonsense. Man's "depravity" is rooted much deeper in his nature and the abolition of private property would do little or nothing to change his basic constitution.

A second aspect of Nietzsche's critique that anticipates Freud is his idea that socialism has its roots *not* in love and fraternity, as the socialists themselves would have us believe, but rather in revenge and aggression. According to Freud, "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (Freud 1961, 72). Freud pointed to nascent Soviet Russia as evidence of this phenomenon: "it is intelligible that the attempt to establish a new, communist civilization in Russia should find its psychological support in the persecution of the bourgeois. One only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they have wiped out their bourgeois" (Freud 1961, 73).

It is clear that Nietzsche identified a similar phenomenon in his assessment of socialism. Socialists, like other underprivileged human beings, express their instinct for power by declaring war on those "responsible" for their suffering. Nietzsche says it is a "basic error" to think of socialists, or any other herd morality, as a collectivity with collective aims. Rather, he contends, goals exist in "single individuals" and the "herd is a means, no more!" (WP 766). Like Freud, Nietzsche held that what is primitive in socialism is *not* a love for one's fellow man, but rather a love of power and a desire to find the most effective way to exercise one's will to power.

In sum, Nietzsche's critique of socialism can be situated with Freud insofar as both instruct us to dig beneath the surface and probe the darkest corners of human nature in order to find the psychological roots of "altruistic" projects. When Freud and Nietzsche engaged in this exercise, each emerged contending that socialists are both delusional and predatory. For both thinkers, the fundamental defect of socialist thought is a flawed theory of human nature that "forgets" man's innate depravity in order to offer hope that "utopia" can be realized in this world.

*Nietzsche and Oakeshott Against "Rationalism in Politics"*

Nietzsche's preference for the nineteenth over the eighteenth century was, in part, grounded in his interpretation of the former as "anti-idealistic, more concrete, more fearless, industrious, moderate, suspicious against sudden changes, *antirevolutionary*" (WP 117). Nietzsche tells us that he is "full of suspicion and malice against what they call 'ideals': this is *my* pessimism, to have recognized how the 'higher feelings' are a source of misfortune and man's loss of value" (WP 80). This critique of idealistic political theories was echoed in the twentieth century by Michael Oakeshott, who lamented the dominance of "rationalism in politics" – the view that political justice could be achieved by transforming society in accordance with rational blueprints.

Like Nietzsche, Oakeshott was suspicious of ideals in politics. For Oakeshott, such suspicion is the essence of the conservative disposition in politics. The conservative, Oakeshott writes:

will be suspicious of proposals for change in excess of what the situation calls for, of rulers who demand extra-ordinary powers in order to make great changes and

whose utterances are tied to generalities like “the public good” or “social justice,” and of Saviors of Society who buckle on armor and seek dragons to slay; he will think it proper to consider the occasion of the innovation with care; in short, he will be disposed to politics as an activity in which a valuable set of tools is renovated from time to time and kept trim rather than as an opportunity for perpetual re-equipment (Oakeshott 2004, 170).

I must be careful not to over-draw this comparison. I do not wish to argue that Nietzsche’s thought parallels Oakeshott’s political philosophy in every way. Rather, I wish to make the limited claim that Nietzsche’s critique of socialism *as the product of systematizers* is similar in character to Oakeshott’s critique of the rationalist approach to politics.

For Oakeshott, the fundamental error of rationalists is to think of political society as a chess board with pieces that can be manipulated to achieve perfect outcomes. Like Nietzsche, Oakeshott rejected the idea that “social combinations” could be mapped out by an elite cadre and then imposed on the rest of society in order to bring about heaven on earth. Against the utopianism of socialists and other ideologues, Oakeshott was suspicious of the presumptiveness of utopian politics.

We are not children in *statu pupillari* but adults who do not consider themselves under any obligation to justify their preference for making their own choices; and that it is beyond human experience to suppose that those who rule are endowed with a superior wisdom which discloses to them a better range of beliefs and activities and which gives them authority to impose upon their subjects a quite different manner of life... Why not? Their dreams are no different from those of

anyone else; and if it is boring to have to listen to dreams of others being recounted, it is insufferable to be forced to re-enact them. (Oakeshott, 2004, 169)

I do not wish to argue that Nietzsche would accept this rather libertarian conception of politics. Rather, what is clear is that Oakeshott's anti-idealism and resistance to "the dreamers" (a term Nietzsche used to label Rousseau) echoes the spirit of the "realism" in Nietzsche's critique of socialism.

## **VI. Conclusion: Nietzsche's Enduring Relevance as a Political Thinker**

My hope is that this reconstruction of Nietzsche's critique of socialism contributes to the ongoing debate about his relevance as a political thinker. Perhaps it is true that his analysis was limited by his understanding of socialist theory and his historical context. These limitations should not, though, lead us to dismiss his arguments out of hand. In the words of Ruth Abbey and Fredrick Appel, we gain more by "engaging" Nietzsche's political thought than by "ignoring" it (1998, 121). In this essay, I have tried to engage Nietzsche's critique of socialism by offering a detailed reconstruction of his understanding of its forerunners, origins, psychology, and errors. Rather than forcing him into our own ideological tents by manipulating his ideas to support the egalitarian sentiments of our age we should maintain his dignity as a serious critic. His penetrating interrogation of socialism is but one of example of how he challenged the fundamental commitments of modernity. Rather than trying to mold Nietzsche into an ideological ally with whom we can feel comfortable, we should accept the discomfort he provokes as his greatest contribution.

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