

TRANSMUTATION SOCIOLOGY: NIETZSCHE AS CRITICAL THEORIST

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INTRODUCTION

An analysis of Nietzsche promises to illuminate some of the central concerns of *critical theory*. Questions of the role of reason in society, the relation between values and knowledge, and the effects of Western civilization on humanity occupy places of prominence for both Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School. Examination of the Nietzschean roots of critical theory is worthwhile as intellectual history. The value of such an exercise is increased if it can be used to reformulate productively the critical vision of society. This reformulation is not predicated on the assumption that Nietzsche is the primordial critical theorist, but uses Nietzschean thought to address the central concerns of critical theory.

THE NIETZSCHEAN INFLUENCE

Nietzsche's influence on Horkheimer appears in three areas. 1) As an exponent of the *Lebensphilosophie* Nietzsche is praised for his dominant theme on the connection of thought to concrete human concerns, and for his sensitivity to the changed circumstances of human existence. The traditional bifurcation of reality into the *true* and *apparent worlds* has collapsed, and with it, the anchorage for the meaning of existence has disappeared. Nietzsche's ringing critique of *The Last Man*, and his biting characterization of European and German society transforms Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical polemics into a kind of social criticism.

2) Horkheimer is enamored of Nietzsche's uncompromisingly critical style. Not only does Horkheimer adopt the essay/aphorist character of Nietzschean style, but the inherent critical quality of the intellectual conscience also leaves its mark. Nietzsche rejects convictions which do not permit experiment. The *courage of one's convictions* is to be replaced by the courage to *attack* one's convictions. 3) Nietzsche's careful and contentious examination of the genealogy of Western morality strikes a resonant note with Horkheimer. That ascetic deprivation has become virtuous, and that an entire culture has been organized on this principle, are fundamental Nietzschean insights on the repressive, ultimately

inhumane character of the emerging bourgeois order.

However, Horkheimer finds Nietzsche wanting for what he deems the ahistorical character of his work. More serious criticism came from Habermas, as chief spokesperson for the Frankfurt Institute. In his complex effort to trace the dissolution of epistemology, its later replacement by the philosophy of science, and the ultimate triumph of pure methodology, Habermas locates Nietzsche on the last step on the path to a sterile research, purged of really interesting problems. Habermas finds Nietzsche so caught in positivism that his efforts to demonstrate that science is an illusion can not fully extract him from the contradictions which science produces. Habermas' general concern is the positivist denial of self reflection as a form of knowledge (Habermas 1971 298). Because positivism identifies science as knowledge *per se* rather than as *one form* of knowledge, the worth and importance of self reflection are deprecated (Giddens 1977 201). Without reflexive knowledge of its human authors, science degenerates into techniques for manipulation and control. Habermas siezes scattered Nietzschean aphorisms which deny the possibility of the cognitive faculty achieving any sort of self reflective knowledge as evidence that Nietzsche "wrote the last chapter" of the prehistory of modern positivism. Thus, Habermas inverts Horkheimer's view of Nietzsche as responding to the emerging crisis in Western thought and Western society in an essentially critical but not wholly satisfactory way. For Habermas, Nietzsche is the final movement toward the crisis, and not the initial response to it.

CENTRAL CONCERNS OF CRITICAL THEORY

We require a general outline of critical theory before we can assess the critical impact of Nietzschean philosophy. Horkheimer provides a concise summary.

.. The critical theory of society is .. the unfolding of a single existential judgment. .. The theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on

which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era. It generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form. And after a period of progress, development of human powers, and the emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism. (Horkheimer 1972 227)

Horkheimer's characterization of the contradictory nature of the commodity economy gives a dialectical cast to the modern era. It is at once, progressive and repressive; emancipating and enslaving; humanizing and dehumanizing. This theme, which both Horkheimer and Adorno (1972 xiii) call "the self destruction of the Enlightenment," becomes the virtual *petitio principii* of the Frankfurt School.

Although this axiom is the foundation on which critical theory is based, other cardinal features can be identified. First, the theory is *critical* in the Kantian sense. It not only opposes existing social forms, but also opposes epistemological categories by which social forms are known (Horkheimer 1972 207). The critique of the means by which the social world is apprehended and understood moves the critical enterprise toward a distinctive theory of knowledge. Second, critical theory is *negative*. This designation is not used here to describe the critical style of refusing to outline positions in any fixed way, defining itself by saying what it is not. Rather, it denotes the virulent nonpositivism of the Frankfurt School. Positivism seeks to remove the presence of the theorist in the knowing process, hence producing knowledge which is sure, methodologically sound, and *positive*. Critical thought places the subject "reflexively investigating the grounds of his claims to knowledge" at the heart of the epistemological process (Giddens 1977 201).

Knowledge is intimately bound with human interests and hopes. It is *negative* and should be examined and criticized, not idolized (Jay 1973 65). Finally, critical theory is *humanist*. It is concerned with human happiness, and is jeopily rooted in the notion of *praxis* (Marcuse 1968 135). The conviction that humanity can *realize* itself only through a transformation of

society and the means by which it is known, is but a corollary of the central proposition of critical thought. Modern culture frees as it enslaves. If humanity is to be free at last, the nature of our knowledge and our society must be radically transformed.

NIETZSCHE & CRITICAL HUMANISM

To hold that Nietzsche is humanist in the same sense as the Frankfurt School is to claim that he shares the twin judgments: 1) that the human life is worth living, and 2) that specific possibilities exist for the amelioration of human life (Marcuse 1964 x). Certainly, Nietzsche is seldom described in these terms. The vitriolic character of large portions of his work would seem to belie any humanist sentiments. Still, there is a strong and abiding humanism at the core of Nietzschean thought. It says "Yes" to life. His affirmation of life as something to be cherished, and is crystallized in the notion of *amor fati* (*love of fate*) which, for him, is the mark of human greatness (Nietzsche 1968c II 10):

That one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but love it.

While the *amor fati* formulation appears in the last of Nietzsche's works, the theme winds throughout his work. Early, it forms the lens through which the nature and meaning of science and art are brought into focus. In Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* we are reminded to remain faithful to the earth, joining the joyous laughter of overcoming ourselves rather than to escape into metaphysical castles. Finally, life and its value form the base from which Nietzsche condemns Christianity and traditional morality as *ressentiment*, a rancor which is:

hostile to life, an agent of the dissolution and destruction of man, an attempt to assassinate the future of man, a sign of weariness, a secret path to nothingness.

As part of this affirmation of life, Nietzsche repeatedly posits humanity as valuable, potentially noble and beautiful. Nietzsche presents Goethe and Zarathustra as images of true humanity. Each is an emancipated and joyous spirit which says "Yes" to life. His portrait of

Goethe underscores his own affirmation of the potential of humanity:

He did not sever himself from life, he placed himself within it .. and took as much as possible upon himself, above himself, within himself. What he aspired to was *totality*; he strove against the separation of reason sensibility, emotion, will, .. he disciplined himself to a whole, he created himself. (1968f IX 49)

This image of man stands high above us, and with the rest of nature, we are straining toward it (Nietzsche 1964 IV).

NEGATIVE MOVEMENT OF AMOR FATI

Nietzsche's various treatments of the *amor fati* theme leave little doubt that he is humanist in the first of the senses noted above. But his claim to want nothing different, not forward, not backward, would seem basically opposed to critical commitment to amelioration of human life. Nietzsche's pessimism is well known. He consistently rejects any hope of correcting the world as a sublime and mystical illusion (1968c 15). He offers no positive hope of amelioration. Yet, *amor fati* contains hope, but hope which is *negative* in a genuinely critical sense.

Nietzsche teaches two things about life: 1) it should be loved as fate, without palliative or protection (Danto 1965 33); 2) it must be overcome. These facets of *amor fati* are at once an affirmation and a negation of life and humanity. Moreover, the first is the mechanism of the second. When life and humanity are loved as fate, they are at the same time overcome and transcended. The dialectical character of *amor fati* is manifest in Nietzsche's discussion of masters and slaves (1968e), and his much maligned *Superman*.

Nietzsche's genealogical search for the roots of morality is more topical than historical. Therefore, his treatment of masters and slaves must be dealt with as a construct rather than as a fact. When Nietzsche describes a *master morality* and a *slave morality* he is not dealing with actual masters and slaves mutually interrelated. Rather, he depicts two basically different dispositions to life; one of noble Yes-saying, and another of servile *ressentiment*.

While every noble morality develops from a

triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says "No" to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself;" and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye – this *need* to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself – is the essence of *ressentiment*; to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all – its action is fundamentally reaction. The slaves' rejection of the value of life, their antihumanism, leads to the devaluation of this world and humanity. All rewards, all meanings and all values are projected into an imaginary, spiritual realm. The passions are repressed, and so become tyrannical, haunting, and tormenting, making life something to be endured, not lived.

Nietzsche's masters engage life with *amor fati*. The master does not praise life as good; he loves it for what it is. *Amor fati* is beyond good and evil, and by loving life as *fate*, the master emancipates himself and becomes a creative free spirit, transcending life and standing over it in judgment.

The noble type of man experiences *itself* as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges, "what is harmful to me is harmful in itself"; it knows itself to be that which first accords honor to things; it is value-creating. Everything it knows as part of itself it honors; such a morality is self glorification. (Nietzsche 1968b 260)

The master, by saying "Yes" to life, negates and moves beyond slave morality and the culture it has predicated on the denial of human worth. Nietzsche remarks his genealogical discovery of master and slave moralities and his move "beyond good and evil as:

.. in all essentials a *critique of modernity*, not excluding the modern sciences, modern arts, and even modern politics, along with pointers to a contrary type that is as little modern as possible – a noble, yes-saying type. All those things of which our age is proud are experienced as contradictions to this type, almost as bad manners; our famous "objectivity," for example; "pity all that suffers"; the "historical sense" with its submission to foreign tastes, groveling on its belly before *petits faits* and "being scientific."

The fulfillment of master morality leads to the *Superman* (Ueberschensch). Like the master, Nietzsche defines the Superman in opposition to a despicable counterpart, the *Last Man*. These Last Men have invented happiness. They are content with their state, bound by the world and their guilt. Nietzsche could not accept humanity with such complacency and resignation. It was to be overcome. This is the meaning of *Superman*.

.. We perish as *merely* human beings in order to become something higher. Human life is a sacrifice, or should be, not to something trans- and extrahuman, but to something attainable by *us* .. We are more than we were, but less than we might become, and the higher fulfillment of ourselves is that which we should seek. The *Ueberschensch* is merely a joyous, guiltless, free human being, in possession of instinctual drives which do not overpower him. He is the master and not the slave of his drives ..

There is a remarkable correspondence between the negation of the Last Man by the Superman and Marcuse's (1964) vision of the liberation of the "Happy Consciousness" in a sublimated but nonrepressive society. The Superman loves life, but does not accept it uncritically. He stands over, beyond, and against what is. He creates value, and thereby creates and fulfills his humanity.

TRANSVALUATION

The critical impact of Nietzsche's humanism and the dialectic character of his view of humanity is starkly revealed in his treatment of modern culture. He disparages the emerging bourgeois order under several pejorative labels: *European, German, Christian, Alexandrian, the herd, and the Wagnerians*. The meaning of all culture is the reduction of man, the potentially self-creating master, to a tame and civilized animal. For Nietzsche European culture represented a regression of mankind, and unless it could be transcended, permanently condemned humanity to the repellent sight of the ill constituted, dwarfed, atrophied and poisoned Last Man. Nietzsche longs for one glance of a man who justifies *man*, but leaves little doubt as to how thing are:

.. the diminution and leveling of European man constitutes *our* greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary. .. We can see

nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian – there is no doubt man is getting "better" all the time.

Nietzsche's sarcastic *better* takes us to the heart of the matter. Modern culture, like the slave morality on which it is based, inverts life and value. What is "better" is in fact worse; what is "human", inhuman; what is "good", bad; what is "growth", decay; and what is "life" is ultimately death to the Last Man.

The remedy for the decadence of the culture of the Last Man is simple, straightforward, and *critical*. The basic values of ascetic bourgeois culture must be surpassed, *transvalued*. Transvaluation is the essentially Critical Act. Culture and the criteria for its judging are simultaneously transcended. Transvaluation begins with *amor fati* as a fundamental predisposition to life. The conditions of life, including the Last Man and his culture, are not rancorously despised, but are loved as something to be overcome. Transvaluation proceeds through the constant negation of modern culture by a continual affirmation of the nobleness of a truly mastered human life. In the end, transvaluation moves beyond values. Humanity is no longer an object which is evaluated by an alien and imaginary realm. Rather, it becomes the true judging, valuing, and honoring subject.

Nietzsche describes this movement of transvaluation by metaphor in a parable of a camel, a lion, and a child. The camel bears an onerous burden, but does not succumb, and becomes a lion. The lion courageously stands against his foes, and becomes a child. Transvaluation is culminated. Transvaluation creatively bridges the gap between theory and *praxis*. Transvaluative thinking is self creating activity *par excellence*. Its dialectical affirmation of life, negation of Last Man culture, and attainment of true humanity grants to theory status as a genuine human activity. In the world of the Last Man, that kind of theory is radically revolutionary.

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