

# On the Philosophy of the Superman

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By Leon Trotsky

## **Preface**

We are presenting the young Leon Trotsky's essay on the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, written in 1900 on the advent of the philosopher's death. It is perspicuous for its criticism of the social roots of Nietzsche's thought, helping to underscore its anti-democratic and authoritarian nature, and traces the appeal Nietzsche had for the most rapacious elements of bourgeois society. Trotsky describes these elements as constituting a "parasitic proletariat" of those "adventurers of finance...supermen of the stock exchange...the unscrupulous blackmailers of politics and journalism", along with layers inclined to what can be described as proto-fascist, represented by the aristocratic radicalism of the Italian poet Gabrielle D'Annunzio. While not meant to be an exhaustive treatment, Trotsky's insights are an important contribution to the continuing debate on the political dimensions of Nietzsche, and he anticipates much of the new scholarship from Dom Dombowsky, Domenico Losurdo, and Jan Rehmann (to name only a few) that challenges establishment liberal and postmodern interpretations. The notion that Nietzsche can be rehabilitated for liberal democracy, much less socialism, is losing credibility, and this translation of Trotsky's essay by Mitchell Abidor will help to further confront the consensus forged by Walter Kaufmann, French post-structuralism, and other depoliticized accounts of Nietzsche. For very understandable reasons Trotsky paid less attention to Nietzsche's place in the history of philosophy than he did to the social roots of his thought. Even today this approach has much to recommend it, although we would also wish to supplement Trotsky's investigation with more recent scholarship. Some periods of history require the bow be bent in one direction more than another when interpreting a thinker, and were Trotsky writing this essay today he would undoubtedly treat the subject in somewhat more nuanced terms, without at the same time weakening his main thesis.

Trotsky recognized this himself when he wrote,

We obviously make no claim to an exhaustive critique of the fantastic creations of Frederick Nietzsche, philosopher in poetry and poet in philosophy. This is impossible within the framework of a few newspaper articles. We only wanted to describe in broad strokes the social base which has shown itself to be capable of giving birth to Nietzscheism, not as a philosophical system contained in a certain number of volumes and for the most part explicable by the individual particularities of its author, but rather as a social current attracting particular attention because we are dealing with a current of the present time.

Were this essay being written today it would obviously have to take account of how that social base has changed in the last 110 years. Moreover, in a contemporary analysis it would also be necessary to consider the influence that Nietzsche had on many avant-garde artists and intellectuals in the past century. While Trotsky rightfully bent the bow in one direction, seeing it as, “indispensable to bring Nietzscheism down from the literary and philosophical heights to the purely earthly basis of social relations”, in order to correct a common attitude in his time that completely dismissed the “earthly basis”, it would be just as wrong in our time - dominated as they are with mechanical determinist conceptions - not to engage the more philosophical problems Nietzsche presents and limit every consideration of Nietzsche back to social relations as if his philosophy could be treated as a chimera. If we do that we will not be able to explain Nietzsche’s lasting influence on artists and intellectuals despite the reactionary content of his philosophy as a whole.

We are grateful to Mitchel Abidor for providing the first English translation of this essay and for the Marxist Internet Archives for publishing it. (Abidor’s English translation was first posted on the Marxist Internet Archives in June, 2011 at this location, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/archive/trotsky/1900/12/nietzsche.htm>). It should be noted that Trotsky originally published this essay in Russian. A very good French translation was published on the Marxist Internet Archives a number of years ago. (It can be accessed here: <http://www.marxists.org/francais/trotsky/livres/litterature/nietzsche.htm>). We have taken the liberty of making certain minor corrections to Abidor’s translation. Specifically, we changed Abidor’s rendering of “revaluation of values” to what is now considered the

standard English translation, “transvaluation of values”. A small number of obvious typographical errors have been corrected and certain French neologisms in Abidor’s translation have been rendered into English. Finally, Abidor’s translation was missing many of the footnotes from the original Russian editors as well as a few original notes of Trotsky. In other cases, some of the footnotes from the Russian editor’s were significantly truncated. We have restored the footnotes of the Russian editors as well as Trotsky’s original notes. In a small number of cases we have expanded on the footnotes from the Russian editor’s to provide a more contemporary understanding of the historical material. In one case we have completely rewritten a note from the Russian editors (Herbert Spencer.) We have indicated in each case if the note was a translation from the Russian editor’s, an expansion of the Russian editor’s note or a complete rewrite. As Trotsky’s essay includes many references to contemporary social and literary critics, the great majority of whom are now forgotten, the inclusion of some of these explanatory notes is necessary to get a feel for Trotsky’s wit and erudition.

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Andrew River

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**Leon Trotsky**

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Recently our newspapers and periodicals have become incredibly respectful “in the presence of death.” There are literati from whom we demand and expect nothing for the simple reason that there is nothing to be gotten from them: they lack even a fig leaf to hide their nudity when it’s needed. It is only right that their praise and criticism leave us indifferent. Corpses themselves, they bury their corpses.

It is not here a question of these men, but of those *hommes de lettres* from whom we would expect a perfectly healthy attitude in the face of literary and social phenomena, even if they are covered with the conciliating veil of death.

Russia recently buried G.A Djanchiev <sup>1</sup> and V.S. Soloviev,<sup>2</sup> and Europe W. Liebknecht<sup>3</sup> and F. Nietzsche. To be sure, it would be rude to “trample on a

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<sup>1</sup> G.A. Djanchiev (1851-1900), historian and liberal publicist, author of a book on the history of reforms during the reign of Alexander II: *Iz Epokha velikikh Reform* (The era of great reforms). Enjoyed great authority in liberal circles. (Russian Editor's note)

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov (1858-1900). Well-known philosopher, publicist and poet, whose mystical and religious conceptions were combined with liberal ideas on social and political issues. Solovyov's philosophy had great success among circles of pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia who were oriented toward mysticism. (Russian Editor's note)

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900): leader of the German working class and one of the founders of the German Social Democratic Party. Liebknecht began his political activity by participating in the revolutionary movement of 1848. After several years of emigration he made contact with Marx and Engels in London and became their disciple. He returned to Germany in 1862 and was from that time until his death the leading representative within the working class of the Marxist current, even before the founding of the Social Democratic Party. In 1868 he founded the newspaper *Demokratische Volksblatt* (Democratic People's Journal) in Leipzig which became in 1869 the

corpse”, to use N.K. Mikailovsky’s <sup>4</sup> expression. But we perhaps show more respect for someone who elaborated a system of thought by putting him in a place appropriate to his literary and social physiognomy rather than through immoderate praise emanating from his enemies. It is not very probable that Liebknecht would have been satisfied with the praise of *Moskovskye Vedomosti* <sup>5</sup> or *Novo Vremia* <sup>6</sup>, just as Nietzsche would not have appreciated that of *Vorwärts!*<sup>7</sup> or that of *Rosskoe Bogatstvo*<sup>8</sup>. We should recall that the Scandinavian

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*Volksblatt*. The newspaper was closed in 1878. In 1890, Liebknecht led the drafting of the central organ of the party, published under the same title in Berlin. In 1874 Liebknecht was elected to the Reichstag, where, with few interruptions, he remained until his death. Liebknecht aligned himself with the left wing of Social Democracy and was one of the leading opponents of revisionist tendencies within that organization. (Russian Editor’s note)

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas K. Mikhailovsky (1842-1904), journalist, sociologist and critic, was one of the leading theorists of populism. He exercised great influence on the younger generation in the eighties. He was a journalist for the publication *Otietchestvennye Zapiski* (Annals of the Fatherland). He published *Chto takoe Progress* (What is progress?), *Gueroi i Tolpa* (Heroes and the crowd), *Teoria Darvin obchchestvennaia Nauka i* (The Theory of Darwin and Social Science). From 1892 on, he was the leading contributor to the journal *Russkoye Bogatstvo* (Russian Wealth). He was a member of the "Narodnaya Volya". In the 1890’s he led an ideological struggle against Marxism. (Russian Editor’s note)

<sup>5</sup> *Moskovskye Vedomosti* (Moscow News): A reactionary newspaper, founded in 1756. From 1855 to 1860 and from 1863 to 1887, it was led by Katkov. It differed from other reactionary newspapers by being more consistent and more virulent. Its slogans were: Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationalism. In 1905 it became, under the direction of Gringmut, the official organ of the monarchist party and led a systematic campaign of persecution against the revolutionary workers, intellectuals and Jews, openly calling for pogroms. (Russian Editor’s note)

<sup>6</sup> *Novoye Vremya* (New Times): Petersburg daily, published since 1876 and edited by Souvarine. The newspaper had a conservative position. It invariably led a furious campaign against the revolutionary democracy, the working class and the radical intelligentsia. The persecution of "aliens," especially Jews, runs like a red thread through all the main articles of the newspaper. *Novoye Vremya* did not distinguish itself with a consistent political line but instead adapted to the twists and turns of ministerial changes. During the revolution of 1905 it played an extreme right wing role, demanding strong action against the revolutionaries and the striking workers. (Russian Editor’s note)

<sup>7</sup> *Vorwärts* (*Forward*): Central organ of German Social Democratic Party, published in Berlin. The newspaper was founded in 1883 as the *Berliner Volksblatt*. The newspaper first appeared in October 1890 under its current title and under the direction of Wilhelm Liebknecht after the repeal of the anti-Socialist law. Its predecessor was first published by Liebknecht under the same title in Leipzig and was closed down in 1878 when the anti-Socialist law went into effect. Since the beginning of the War of 1914, *Vorwärts*, as the organ of the majority of the Social Democratic Party, supported the German war effort. The paper remained in the hands of the majority throughout the war. After the October Revolution the newspaper waged a fierce campaign against the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. (Russian Editor’s note)

<sup>8</sup> *Russkoye Bogatstvo* (Russian Wealth): One of the most influential monthlies before the revolution. Began to be published under that title in 1880. In 1891 it passed into the hands of former employees of *Otietchestvennye Zapiski* (Annals of the Fatherland.) In 1895, Mikhailovsky became the inspiration for the magazine, and henceforth *Russkoye Bogatstvo* became the organ of populism. From 1916 the magazine was released under the title *Russky Zapiski* (Annals Russian). It ceased publication after the October Revolution. (Russian Editor’s note)

*Kiland*<sup>9</sup> affirms — and we believe him with no difficulty — that all the praise of the radical press procured him less pleasure and moral satisfaction than the venomous insults of reactionary journalists.

If we must “speak well of the dead or say nothing at all,” in this case it is preferable to observe a respectful silence rather than obscure the social significance of the deceased by a flood of unctuous praise devoid of meaning. We can and we must have an impartial attitude towards the persons of our social enemies by according them the tribute owed to their sincerity and their varied individual virtues. But an enemy, if he is sincere or not, living or dead, remains an enemy, in particular an enemy who lives in his works even after his death. In remaining silent we commit a social crime: “Not opposing actively,” a famous Russian thinker said, “means supporting passively.” This should not be forgotten, even in the face of the tragedy of death.

These reflections have led us to dedicate a few words to the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, recently deceased, and in particular to the aspects of his doctrine that concern his concepts concerning and judgments of society, his sympathies and antipathies, his social criticism, and his societal ideal.

For many people Nietzsche’s life and personality explain his philosophy: he could not passively accept the situation his illness placed him in. His forced retirement from public life led him to elaborate a theory that gave him not only the possibility of living under those conditions, but conferred a meaning on that life. The cult of suffering was the consequence of his illness.

You want to annihilate suffering as much as possible and we, it appears, want to increase it, make it stronger than it was. The cult of suffering, of great suffering: is it possible that this cult has led men to the highest summits?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kilander (1849-1888): Norwegian writer, representative of the realist movement in Norwegian literature. (Russian Editor’s note)

<sup>10</sup> We will not give references, since the publication of the *works* of Nietzsche in eight volumes, not counting the additional volumes, is excessively heavy artillery for a few newspaper articles. (Original note of Trotsky)

“In these words”, says Alois Riehl<sup>11</sup>, “we hear the voice of a sick man who transformed suffering into a means of education of the will.”

But the cult of suffering is only a part, and not one of the most characteristic ones, of Nietzsche’s philosophical system; a part that was rashly put in the forefront by several of our philosopher’s critics and exegetes.

The social axis of his system (if it is permitted to offend Nietzsche’s writings with a term as vulgar in the eyes of their author as that of “system”) is the recognition of the privilege granted a few “chosen” to freely enjoy all the goods of existence. These happy chosen are not only exempted from productive labor, but also from the “labor” of domination. “It is for you to believe and serve (*Dienstbarkeit*)! Such is the destiny Zarathustra offers ordinary mortals in his ideal society, whose number is too great”(*den Vielvuzielen*). Above them is the caste of those who give orders, of guardians of the law, of warriors. At the summit is the king, “the highest image of the warrior, judge, and guardian of the law.” Compared to the “supermen” all of them are auxiliaries, they are employed in the “rude tasks of domination: they serve to transmit to the mass of slaves “the will of the legislators.” Finally, the highest caste is that of “masters, of “creators of values,” of “legislators,” of “supermen.” They inspire the activity of the entire social organism. They will play on earth the same role that God, according to the Christian faith, plays in the universe.

Thus even the “labor” of leadership falls not on superior beings, but only on the most elevated among the inferior. As concerns the “chosen,” the supermen,” freed of all social and moral obligations they lead a life full of adventure, happiness, and joy: “Given that I live, “ says Nietzsche, “ I want life to overflow, that it be in me and outside me as prodigal, as luxurious as possible.”

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<sup>11</sup> Alois Riehl (1844-1924), German philosopher of the neo-Kantian school, author of the book: *Der Kritizismus Philosophie* (Theory of science and metaphysics from the perspective of philosophical criticism). (Russian Editor’s note)



It is a question, above, of the cult of suffering — meaning physical suffering — which no devotion on the part of the slaves can spare the superman. As concerns the suffering tied to social disturbances, the superman, of course, must be absolutely freed from them. If there remains one mandatory task for the superman, (and this only for the superman *im Werden* — in the process of becoming) it is that of perfecting himself, which means the elimination of all that might resemble pity. The superman “falls if he allows himself to be dominated by feelings of pity, regret, and sympathy.” According to the former “table of values” pity is a virtue; Nietzsche considers it the greatest temptation and the most frightful danger. The “gravest sin” according to Zarathustra, the most horrible of misfortunes, is pity. If he feels anything for the unfortunate, if he is touched at the sight of sorrow, his destiny has come to an end: he is vanquished, his name must be crossed from the list of the caste of “masters.” “Everywhere, Zarathustra says, “there resounds the voice of those to whom it is indispensable that death be preached, or eternal life, [he says with an honest cynicism]; which of them is if of no importance to me as long as they disappear (*dahinfahren*) as quickly as possible.”

Before arriving at the elaboration of his positive ideal, Nietzsche had to submit the dominant social norms in the realms of the state, law and especially morality to criticism. He judged it useful to “re-evaluate all values.” In appearance, what limitless radicalism, what a daring revolutionary idea. Riehl says that “until him no one had analyzed moral values; no one had criticized moral principles.” Riehl’s opinion isn’t isolated, which, it must be said, doesn’t prevent it from being perfectly superficial. More than once humanity has felt the need for a fundamental revision of its ethics, and many thinkers have accomplished this work in more radical and profound a fashion than Nietzsche. If there is something original in his system it’s not the transvaluation of values in itself, but rather the point of view that is at its origin: the will to power, which is at the base of the aspirations, demands, and desires of the superman. This is the criterion for the evaluation of the past, the present, and the future. But even this is of a doubtful

originality. Nietzsche himself writes that in his research into the moralities that dominated in the past and dominate today he encountered two fundamental tendencies: the master's morality and the slave's morality. The master's morality serves as the basis for the conduct of the superman. This dual character of morality traverses the history of humanity like a red thread, and it isn't Nietzsche who discovered it.

“It is for you to believe and to serve, Zarathustra reminded us, addressing those whose number is too great. The higher caste is that of the “masters, the “creators of values.” For the masters and for them alone, the morality of the superman was created. What novelty, no? Even the landlords during the time of serfdom, who knew little about this subject, knew that there exist people who have blue blood and others who don't<sup>12</sup> and that what is necessary for one group is reprehensible in the others. Thus they knew, according to the words of the brilliant satirist, that “it was not fitting for a noble to occupy himself with commerce, to have a profession, and to blow his nose without the assistance of a handkerchief, but that it was not inappropriate to gamble an entire village at a game of cards or to trade young Arichka for a hunting dog; that it wasn't proper for a peasant to shave his beard, to drink tea, and to wear boots, but it wasn't improper to exchange a thousand versts of land for a letter of Matriona Ivanovna to Avdotia Vassilievna in which Matriona Ivanovna wishes her friend a good holiday and announces that thanks to God she feels fine” (*Satiry v prose*)<sup>13</sup>

One of the least critical critics of Nietzsche recognizes that “if we remove from his ideas the paradoxical and poetic form in which they are incarnated in his writings they are often much less novel than they appear on first sight.”

(Lichtenberg, *Die Philosophie F. Nietzsche*).

Nietzsche's philosophy is not as new as it seems, but it can be considered original to the extent that in order to explain it it is necessary to refer exclusively to the

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<sup>12</sup> Literally, people with black bones and people with white bones.

<sup>13</sup> (Satires in prose.) Work by M.E. Saltykov Shchedrin, *Sotchiniénia*, St Petersburg, 1887, t. VII, p. 318. (Russian Editor's note)

complex individuality of its author. In this case, how can one explain that in such a short span of time it has acquired so many adepts; how can one explain that Nietzsche's ideas," in the words of A. Riehl, "have for many become an article of faith?" We can only do so by stating that the soil in which Nietzsche's philosophy grew is in no way exceptional. There exist large groups of people whose social conditions place them in a situation that Nietzsche's philosophy corresponds to like no other.

In our literature Gorky and Nietzsche have often been compared. At first sight such a comparison might seem strange: what can the bard of the humiliated and offended, of the least of the least, have in common with the apostle of the superman? To be sure the difference is enormous, but the relationship between the two is much closer than one would at first believe.

Gorky's heroes,<sup>14</sup> according to the intentions and, in part, the way they are represented, are not at all the humiliated and the offended; they are not the least of the least: in their way, they are supermen. Many, and even the majority, find themselves in a situation which is not at all the result of their defeat in the cruel social struggle which caused them to leave the straight and narrow. No; it is a choice they've made to not accommodate themselves to the narrowness of contemporary social organization, with its laws and morality, and instead to leave society. This is what Gorky says. We grant him the responsibility for his assertions; on this subject we maintain our position. As the ideologue of a given social group Gorky could not reason differently. An individual, attached by material and ideological ties to a certain group cannot consider it a gathering of rejects: he must find a meaning for the existence of his group. The fundamental social strata can easily find such a meaning by relying on an analysis, however superficial, of contemporary society, with its system of production, of which the strata are indispensable elements. These are the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and intellectual workers." It is not the same with the group that Gorky makes himself

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<sup>14</sup> See the essay "O romane voobchtché i o romane *Troié v tchastnosti*" [On the novel in general and on Gorky's 'The Three' in particular]. In L. TROTSKY, *Sotchiniénia*. (not available in English.)

the bard of and the apologist for. Living outside society, though on its territory and at its expense, it seeks the justification of its existence in the consciousness of its superiority over the members of organized society. It appears that the framework of this society is too narrow for those of its members gifted by nature with exceptional particularities, more or less superhuman.” We are here dealing with the same kind of protest against the norms of contemporary society as those of Nietzsche.<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche became the ideologue of a group living like a bird of prey at the expense of society, but under conditions more fortunate than those of the miserable *lumpenproletariat*: they are a *parasitenproletariat* of a higher caliber. The composition of this group in contemporary society is quite heterogeneous and fluid even given the extreme complexity and diversity of relationships within the bourgeois regime. But what ties together all the disparate members of the social order of bourgeois chivalry is the open and at the same time (as a general rule, of course) unpunished pillage on an immense scale of the goods of consumption without any (we insist on stressing this) methodical participation in the organized process of production and distribution. As the representative of the type we have just outlined we can cite the hero of Zola’s novel “L’Argent, Saccar. Obviously all of the adventurers of finance don’t have the breadth of Zola’s celebrated hero. We have an example on a smaller scale in Stratz’s (bad) novel “Le Dernier Choix” (the translation is available in the collection of *Russkoye Bogatsstvo*): it deals with a count who gambles on the stock exchange.

But the difference is quantitative and not qualitative. In general there are so many characters of this type in contemporary literature that we don’t know which one to concentrate on.

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<sup>15</sup> Note in passing a common feature of the two writers mentioned: The respect for “strong men”. Gorky forgives a man any negative act (as long as, according to Gorky) it is the result of a force that seeks to express itself. These acts are described so well and with so much love that even a reader who does not agree with them will become excited about their “strength” and come to admire them. This is the case with old Gordiéiev and some other heroes of Gorky. (Note of Trotsky.)

It should not be deduced from all this that being Nietzschean means being an adventurer of finance or a vulture of the stock market. In fact, the bourgeoisie has spread its individualism beyond the borders of its own class, thanks to the organic ties within society. We can say the same thing relative to the numerous ideological elements of the *parasitenproletariat*, all of whose members are far from being conscious Nietzscheans. Most of them probably are even unaware of Nietzsche's existence insofar as they concentrate their intellectual activity on an entirely different sphere; on the other hand, each of them is a Nietzschean despite himself.

However, it is not superfluous to remark that certain purely bourgeois ideologues have developed ideas in many ways close to those of Nietzsche; for example, one of the best known bourgeois thinkers, the English oracle Herbert Spencer.<sup>16</sup> We find in him the same contempt for the masses (though with more moderation), the same praise for struggle as an instrument of progress, the same protest against assistance for the weak, who supposedly perish through their own fault. "Instead, the bourgeois encyclopedist declares, "of supporting the fundamental law of voluntary cooperation [!!], consisting in each advantage having to be paid for with money obtained through productive labor, they [we understand who is hidden behind this 'they' LT] strive to render a large quantity of goods accessible to all, independently of the efforts provided for their creation. Free libraries, free museums should be organized at the expense of society and made accessible to all, independently of their merits. Thus the savings of the most deserving must be taken from the tax collectors and serve to procure certain commodities for the

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), English philosopher who was strongly influenced by Darwin. The historian Richard Hofstadter labeled him a "Social Darwinist". Spencer developed an all-encompassing system based on what he considered to be the principle of evolution by natural selection. He assumed that natural selection in the biological realm had its counterpart in natural selection in the social realm. On the basis of this metaphysical construct he defended extremely reactionary positions. He viewed any attempt by society to alleviate the plight of the poor and the working class as a violation of the principle of natural selection. He was the first to pen the term "survival of the fittest". His bastardization of Darwin's theory of evolution caught on with a wide audience in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially among the new class of robber barons in the United States whose motto became, "The richest American is the fittest American." Spencer's arguments were put to use throughout Europe and North America to oppose attempts at unionization and social welfare legislation. Although no one reads Spencer today, in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he was the single most famous European intellectual. (The original note by the Russian Editor's has been rewritten to provide a more contemporary interpretation of Spencer's significance. A.S.)

least deserving, who save nothing.” We should recall here the polemic that opposed N.K. Mikhailovsky to Spencer because the latter didn’t want remedies to be found for the natural consequences of poverty and vice. Compare this demand with Zarathustra’s speech: “The earth is full of people to whom it is indispensable that death be preached.” They shouldn’t be helped; rather they should be pushed so they fall faster. “*Das ist gross, das gehört zur grasse...*” (this is sublime).

But the resemblance — which is formal — ends here. Spencer does not in the least want to exempt the bourgeoisie of the “labor” of domination, and the superior type for him is not the man of unfettered instincts. The bourgeoisie as a class, and the capitalist regime as a determined system of relations of production, are two phenomena unthinkable each without the other, and Spencer, as ideological representative of the bourgeoisie, cannot contest bourgeois norms. If he protests against assistance for the weak it is precisely because he fears the unleashing of these weak on the social order so dear to his heart and, at the same time, on his peaceful office so well protected by the order in question.

This is not the case with Nietzsche. He contests all the norms of the society around him. All the virtues of the philistines disgust him. For him the average bourgeois is a weak being, every bit as much so as the proletarian. And this is quite natural. The average bourgeois is a reasonable individual; he nibbles slowly, in accordance with the system, accompanying himself with emotional phrases, moralizing sermons, and sentimental declarations on the sacred mission of labor. A bourgeois superman does not at all act like this: he grasps, he takes, he pillages, he eats everything down to the bone and he adds: “There’s nothing more to be said.”<sup>17</sup>

The “healthy” bourgeoisie could only respond to Nietzsche’s negative attitude with an equally negative attitude. For example, we know what one of the

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<sup>17</sup> It would be interesting to draw an analogy between the lord of the Middle Ages who consistently exploits the service of the peasantry and the “superman” of feudal society, the “Raubritter” [the robber baron, a figure in medieval Germany who felt free to plunder irrespective of the limits imposed by laws and custom ] who proclaims: “ist keine Rauben Schanda, die das tun besten im Lande” (“[Normal] exploitation is shameful, they are the best who plunder”). Is this not the “superman”? (Note of Trotsky)

representatives of the bourgeois golden mean, Max Nordau <sup>18</sup>, a man more grandiloquent than profound, envious to the point of pettiness and not sparing in his use of energetic expressions, thought of Nietzsche. He wrote, “A theoretician was needed for the systematic filthiness and rejects of humanity exalted by the literary and artistic talent of Parnassians and aesthetes, for the synthesis of crime, of impurity and illness praised to the heavens by demonism and decadence in order to create a free and whole man à la Ibsen. And it was Nietzsche who was the first to proclaim this theory, or what pretends to be one. (*Entartung*) [Degeneration]. Nordau is no more indulgent towards Nietzsche’s disciples. As Nordau said, “The declaration of principle according to which nothing is true and everything is allowed, emanating from a morally insane scholar, found an immense echo among those who, as a result of a moral deficiency, nourish a visceral hatred for the social order. Before that great discovery the intellectual proletariat of the great cities exults.”

Those who build their prosperity on the fall of a ministry, the death of a statesman, journalistic blackmail, a political scandal, or on a rise or a fall of stock values, cannot expect to be encouraged by the virtuous petit-bourgeoisie and its ideologues. In the already quoted novel by Rudolf Stratz we find the same attitude towards Nietzsche as that of Nordau on the part of the virtuous heroes (and through them, on the part of the author as well, who is himself a philistine) towards the cynical count who, basing himself apparently on the idea that nothing is true and everything is allowed,” considers Berliners sheep destined to be nobly shorn. And the attitude of the virtuous Berliners towards the non-virtuous count is fully understandable.

Bourgeois society has elaborated certain moral and juridical codes that it is strictly forbidden to transgress. Since it likes to exploit others, the bourgeoisie

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<sup>18</sup> Max Nordau (1849-1923), a German writer who produced attractive if superficial works. His most noted works were *Paradox* (1885), *Degeneration* (1892-1893) and *The conventional lie of human culture* (1883). Although born into a family of Orthodox Jews in Hungary, he emigrated to Germany as a young man and considered himself fully assimilated into German culture. However the Dreyfuss Affair had a profound impact on him, as it did on many other Jews who had up till then considered themselves Europeans. He converted to Zionism and along with Theodore Herzl, helped found the Zionist movement in which he participated for the remainder of his life. (Russian Editor’s note elaborated with more historical material. A.S.)

doesn't like to be exploited. But the Uebermensch of all kinds grow fat dipping into the bourgeois funds of surplus value, i.e., they live directly at the expense of the bourgeoisie. It goes without saying that they can't place themselves under the protection of its ethical laws. Consequently, they must create moral principles corresponding to their way of life. Until recently this higher category of *parasitenproletariat* had no global ideology that gave it the possibility of justifying the "higher" reasons for its rapacious actions. The justification of the rapacity of the industrial bourgeoisie, "healthy thanks to its historical merits and organizational capacity, without which it appears that social production could not exist, this justification is obviously not appropriate for the knights of higher and lower stock prices,<sup>19</sup> for the adventurers of finance, for the supermen of the stock exchange, for the unscrupulous blackmailers of politics and journalism: in a word, for that entire mass of parasitical proletarians that has solidly attached itself to the bourgeois organism and which in one way or another lives and in general doesn't live badly at the expense of society without giving it anything in exchange. Individual representatives of these groups contented themselves with the consciousness of their intellectual superiority over those who allowed themselves to be shorn (but how could they do otherwise?). But this group, quite large and ever growing, needed a theory that gave it the right to dare," given its intellectual superiority. It waited for its apostle and found it in the person of Nietzsche. With his cynical sincerity, his great talent, Nietzsche appeared before it, proclaiming his "master's morality," his "everything is allowed," and it praised him to the skies...

The life of a noble being, Nietzsche teaches, is an uninterrupted chain of adventures full of danger. Happiness doesn't interest him, but rather the excitement procured by risk.

Finding itself in an unstable social position, one day at the heights of prosperity, the next risking finding itself among the accused, the pernicious dregs of

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<sup>19</sup> In Trotsky's original Russian essay the words "higher and lower" are rendered in French as "*hausse*" et de la "*baisse*".



bourgeois society was bound to find Nietzsche's ideas on a life full of adventures more appropriate than that of a philistine like Smiles,<sup>20</sup> who preaches a vulgar petit-bourgeois moderation and punctuality that renders all of existence flat (Smiles is the godfather of the petit-bourgeoisie that was beginning to develop). These dregs also rejected the theses of utilitarian morality based on strictly rationalist principles preached by Bentham,<sup>21</sup> the spiritual leader of the healthy" British *grande bourgeoisie*, scrupulous and honest (in the commercial sense of the term, of course).

According to Nietzsche, humanity will raise itself to the superman when it will have rejected the current hierarchy of values and, above all, Christian and democratic ideals. Bourgeois society, at least in words, respects democratic principles. Nietzsche for his part, as we have seen, separates morals into the morality of masters and the morality of slaves. His mouth foams at the word democracy." He is full of hatred for the democracy infatuated with egalitarianism that strives to transform man into a contemptible herd animal.

Things would go badly for the superman if the slaves were to adopt their morality, if society were to find it unworthy of itself to dedicate itself to slow, productive labor. This is why, with the open cynicism that characterizes him, Nietzsche writes in a letter that the popularization of his doctrine "presents a considerable risk" (*Wagnis*), not because of those who dare act in accordance with that doctrine, but because of those *to* whom it is spoken of. He adds: "My consolation is that no ears exist to hear my great novelty." From this danger flows the dual character of morality. For humanity as a whole not only is it not indispensable that it follow the "master's morality," which is created for the masters and they alone, but on the contrary it is demanded of the ordinary people,

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<sup>20</sup> Samuel Smiles (1812-1904): English writer and moralist. The very titles of his works, *Self-Help*, *Character*, *Thrift*, *Duty*, give a sense of his morals and his crude philosophy of individual self-improvement, which he illustrates with lots of inspiring examples from the life of 'inventors and industrialists'. (Russian Editor's note)

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Bentham (1746-1832): English jurist and philosopher and the founder of utilitarianism, the doctrine that the principle of morality is the greatest good for the greatest number of people possible. Subsequently Bentham reached the conviction that in politics, the only form of government consistent with utilitarianism was a democracy based on the will of the majority. A monarchy whether limited or absolute, where a minority rules, was seen as a tyranny contrary to nature. (Russian Editor's note)

the non-supermen, that they “fulfill the common labors in serried ranks,” obedient to those born for a superior life. It is demanded of them that they find their happiness in the conscientious fulfilling of the obligations imposed on them by the existence of a society at the summit of which is found a small number of supermen. To want the inferior castes to find moral satisfaction in service to the great is not, as you can see, particularly new.

Though it frequently occurs that the members of this brilliant bourgeois proletariat find themselves holding the levers of power, in general in bourgeois society they don't hold governmental power. It falls into their hands as the result of a kind of social misunderstanding, and their government ends in scandals like Panama,<sup>22</sup> the Dreyfus Affair<sup>23</sup> and Crispi Affair.<sup>24</sup> They don't seize power with the goal of reorganizing society, which they consider in a negative fashion, but simply to enjoy public wealth. On this point as well, consequently, Nietzsche finds a favorable echo in them, since they free the supermen of the labor of leadership. In its negative attitude the lumpenproletariat, that parasitical proletariat of a lower rank, is more consistent than Nietzsche's admirers: it rejects

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<sup>22</sup> Panama: Refers to a trial triggered by abuses in the management of a corporation created for the construction of the Panama Canal that linked the Atlantic and Pacific. During the trial many outrageous details were unveiled undermining a number of ministers, MPs and representatives known to the press. "Panama" became a common name for all kinds of social or political scandals. (Russian Editor's note)

<sup>23</sup> Dreyfus Affair: In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a young French artillery officer of Alsatian Jewish descent was convicted of treason for allegedly passing on French military secrets and sentenced to life imprisonment in the French penal colony of Devil's Island. Two years later evidence came to light that a Major in the French Army, Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, was the real culprit. However high ranking military officers suppressed the evidence against Esterhazy with the result that Esterhazy was subsequently acquitted after a brief trial while new charges were lodged against Dreyfus. The framing of Dreyfus and its cover-up gave rise to a political scandal that divided French political life in the 1890s and early 1900s. The evidence indicated that Dreyfus frame-up was part of an attempt by Monarchists and anti-Semites inside and outside the French military to discredit the Republic. The exoneration of Dreyfus became a cause celebre among the most liberal and democratic elements of French society as well as the Socialist movement. Thanks to the efforts of the writer Emile Zola, French Socialist leader Jean Jaures and other activists, Dreyfus was returned to Paris in 1899 and given a new trial, although he was not to be fully exonerated of all wrong-doing and restored to his rank in the military until 1906. The Dreyfus trial exposed a number of crimes in which the highest authorities of the Republic were personally involved and the monstrous corruption of the bourgeois press and bourgeois political representatives in parliament. (Russian Editor's note expanded with more historical details. A.S.)

<sup>24</sup> Francesco Crispi: Italian politician who served in the cabinet or as prime minister in various governments from 1887 to 1891 and from 1893 to 1896. Although he started his political life on the Left, he later announced his conversion to Monarchism. His name was associated with scandalous revelations of abuses in the major Italian banks. (Russian Editor's note)

society in its entirety. It finds too narrow not only the spiritual framework of that society, but its material organization. The Nietzscheans for their part, while rejecting the juridical and ethical norms of bourgeois society, have nothing against the commodities created through its material organization. Nietzsche's superman is not at all disposed to renounce the learning, the advantages, and the new forces humanity has acquired over a long and difficult road; on the contrary, the entire conception of the world (if we can use this term here), the entire philosophy of the Nietzscheans serves to justify the enjoyment of the goods in whose creation they played no part, not even a formal one.

Nietzsche wants everyone, before being classed among the chosen, to answer the question: "Are you one of those who has the right to escape the yoke? But he did not give, cannot give objective criteria for answering this question. The positive or negative response thus depends on the good will and rapacious talents of each.

Nietzsche's philosophical system, as he more than once pointed out, contains a great number of contradictions. Here are some examples: Nietzsche rejects contemporary morality, but principally those of its aspects (pity, charity, etc.) that regulate (only formally, it is true) attitudes towards those "who are too numerous." On the other hand, the supermen, in their reciprocal relations, are in no way freed from moral objections. When Nietzsche speaks of these relations he doesn't fear employing words like good and evil, and even respect and gratitude."

Even though he revaluated all values this revolutionary of morality considers the traditions of the privileged classes with much respect and takes pride in descending from a Count Nietzsche, a pedigree which is in any case highly doubtful. This famous individualist nourishes the most tender sympathy for the French *Ancien Régime* in which individuality had little place. The aristocrat, the representative of quite precise social sympathies, always dominated in him over the individualist, the announcer of an abstract principle.

Given these contradictions it is not surprising that completely opposed social elements would place themselves under the flag of Nietzscheism. An adventurer unaware of his lineage can totally ignore the Nietzschean respect for aristocratic traditions. He only takes from Nietzsche what corresponds to his social position. The motto 'Nothing is true, all is permitted' corresponds to his way of life like no other. By extracting from the works of Nietzsche everything that can serve the development of the ideas contained in this aphorism one could construct a well turned theory completely fit to serve as a fig leaf for the valiant heroes of the French Panama scandal or the patriotic epic of Mamontov.<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> But alongside this group, which is entirely the product of bourgeois society, we find among Nietzsche's admirers representatives of a completely different historical formation, men whose genealogy goes way back. We aren't speaking of those who, like the count in Stratz's novel, exchanged their knightly virtues for stock certificates. These people no longer belong to their order. Déclassé, they pay as little attention to noble traditions as any plebian. We speak of those who are hanging on to the flotsam of what once placed them at the top of the social ladder. Driven from the social circuit they have their own reasons to be discontented with the contemporary social system, its democratic tendencies, its laws, its morality.

Take for example Gabriele D'Annunzio<sup>27</sup>, the famous Italian poet, aristocrat by birth and conviction. We don't know if he calls himself Nietzschean and to what

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<sup>25</sup> We do not know whether Mr. Plevako used Nietzsche in his defense pleadings in the same way Mr. Garnier did with Goethe in his testimony. If Mamontov is the Russian Faust, is there anything missing if he were to play the role of a Muscovite "superman"? (Note by Trotsky. See the following note for the references to Plevako and Mamontov.)

<sup>26</sup> Epic of Mamontov: Savva Ivanovich Mamontov was the leading defendant in a famous embezzlement trial that took place in Moscow in 1900. Mamontov was one of the leading industrialists in Russia and was head of the Moscow-Yaroslavl-Archangelsk Railway. He was accused of forgery and the embezzlement of 10 million rubles. His defense attorney was the famous Russian jurist Fedor Plevako whose remarkable oratorical skills were put to good use when all the accused were acquitted. (Russian Editor's note expanded. A.S.)

<sup>27</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) was an Italian poet, journalist, novelist, dramatist, politician and daredevil. From early in his career he became an enthusiastic advocate of Italian *irredentism*, the ultra-nationalist and expansionist movement that gave expression to the desire of the new Italian bourgeoisie to take their place as a major imperialist power alongside the other European powers. Trotsky's characterization of D'Annunzio proved to be prophetic as D'Annunzio was later considered to be a precursor to Benito Mussolini and the Fascist movement in the years during and after World War I. Following in the footsteps of D'Annunzio, Mussolini saw the Italian Fascist state as a rebirth of the Roman Empire.

extent Nietzsche's thought is at the origin of his ideas. But this has no importance for us. What counts here is that D'Annunzio's ultra-aristocratic ideas are nearly identical with those of Nietzsche. As is to be expected from an aristocrat, D'Annunzio hates bourgeois democracy. "In Rome", he said,

I saw the most shameful profanations that have ever blackened sacred things. Like flowing cloacae, a river of base envies invades the squares and streets. The king, descendant of a line of warriors, sets an example of amazing patience in the accomplishing of vulgar and tedious obligations prescribed by a plebian decree.

Addressing himself to poets, he says:

What does your vocation now consist of? Must we now praise universal suffrage; must we, by our wheezy hexameters, hasten the fall of royalty, the coming of the republic, popular seizure of power? For a reasonable sum we could convince the incredulous that might, right, wisdom, and enlightenment can be found in the masses.

But that is not the task of poets:

Mark the foolish foreheads of those who wanted to render all human heads uniform, like nails under the hammer of the worker. Let your irrepressible laughter climb to the heavens when you hear at demonstrations the din of the grooms of the animal that is the populace."

Addressing the impotent flotsam of the aristocratic past, he shouts,

Wait for and prepare the event. It will not be difficult for you to return the herd to obedience. The men of the people will forever remain slaves, because there is in them the innate need to reach out towards chains. Remember that the soul of the crowd knows only panic.

Entirely in agreement with Nietzsche, D'Annunzio judges the transvaluation of all values indispensable, something that must occur:

The new Roman Caesar, predestined by nature to domination, will come and wipe out or overturn all the values admitted for too long by all kinds of doctrines. He will be capable of constructing and casting into the future that ideal bridge thanks to which the privileged species could finally cross over the precipice that apparently still separates them from the ardently desired domination.

This new Roman Caesar will be an aristocrat, “handsome, strong, cruel, and passionate” (the quotations from D'Annunzio are taken from Ukraina’s article in *Jizn*, no. 7, 1900).

This being with the appearance of a brute is barely distinguishable from Nietzsche’s superman. “The aristocratic and rapacious brute”, according to Nietzsche’s expression, gives man and each thing its value: what is useful or harmful to him is good or evil in itself.

It is time to conclude, all the more so because our study has gone on far longer than foreseen. We obviously make no claim to an exhaustive critique of the fantastic creations of Frederick Nietzsche, philosopher in poetry and poet in philosophy. This is impossible within the framework of a few newspaper articles. We only wanted to describe in broad strokes the social base which has shown itself to be capable of giving birth to Nietzscheism, not as a philosophical system contained in a certain number of volumes and for the most part explicable by the individual particularities of its author, but rather as a social current attracting particular attention because we are dealing with a current of the present time. It seemed to us to be all the more indispensable to bring Nietzscheism down from the literary and philosophical heights to the purely earthly basis of social relations because a strictly ideological attitude, conditioned by subjective reactions of sympathy or antipathy for the moral and other theses of Nietzsche, results in nothing good. Mr. Andreyevich<sup>28</sup> gave us a recent example in giving himself over to excesses of hysteria in the columns of *Jizn*.

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<sup>28</sup> Pseudonym of the literary critic Yevgeny Soloviev, (1866-1905). He published essays in the literary journal *Jizn'* (*Life*) on literature and social issues in the years 1870-1890.

It would certainly not be difficult to unearth in Nietzsche's voluminous works a few pages which, outside their context, might serve to illustrate any preconceived thesis, particularly within the framework of a global exegesis which, parenthetically, would be quite useful to the works of Nietzsche, which are more obscure than profound. This is what the anarchists of Western Europe did, who hastened to consider Nietzsche one of them and who received a cruel rebuff: the philosopher of the master's morality rejected them with all the rudeness he was capable of. It is clear to the reader, we hope, that we find sterile such a literary and textual attitude towards the writings rich in paradoxes of the recently deceased German thinker, whose aphorisms are often contradictory and in general allow for dozens of interpretations. The natural road towards a correct clarification of Nietzschean philosophy is the analysis of the social base that gave birth to this complex product. The present article strove to carry out an analysis of this kind. The base revealed itself to be rotten, pernicious, and poisoned. From which this conclusion: let them invite us as much as they want to dive in all confidence into Nietzscheism, to breathe deeply in his works the fresh air of proud individualism. We will not answer these appeals and, without fearing facile reproaches of narrowness and exclusivism, will reply with skepticism the way Nathaniel did in the gospel: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

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