

Nietzsche and Critical Social Theory

Affirmation, Animosity, and Ambiguity

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Marx, Nietzsche, and the Contradictions of Capitalism

Ishay Landa

1 Introduction

Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche have a lot in common in their basic vision of modernity. It is mistaken, for example, to assume that Nietzsche was interested chiefly in ethical and cultural matters, as opposed to Marx's supposed fixation on the economic 'base.' Nietzsche's whole notion of culture was predicated upon a keen appreciation of the indispensable role of economic arrangements, particularly of the hierarchical division of labor, in sustaining all culture, while Marx, for his part, was deeply concerned about the fate of civilization. Their respective social vantage-points and political projects, however, were fundamentally opposed: Marx envisioned a society overcoming class division, whereas Nietzsche directed all his powers at preventing precisely such an outcome. What Nietzsche in many respects offers us is therefore a Marxist theory with inverted signs.¹

No comprehensive comparison of these two immensely complex and influential philosophers is possible here, of course. But if we have to zoom in on the most important feature they have in common, it is useful to foreground the fact that both Marx and Nietzsche were thinkers of the contradiction: contradictions and dealing with contradictions was absolutely central to their thought. Yet to this the caveat must be added that Marx was a conscious thinker of the contradiction, a dialectician, so he came closer to mastering contradictions, or was at least disposed to thinking them through systematically. For Marx, furthermore, contradictions were celebrated as the prime agent of *change*, impelling a revolutionary forward *movement*. This indispensable insight about the inextricable linkage between contradiction, motion and change was inherited from the Hegelian dialectic, and it might be helpful to recall Hegel's original emphasis on this point:

¹ A portion of this essay appeared in Landa (2019).

Something moves, not because at one moment it is here and at another there, but because at one and the same moment it is here and not here, because in this “here,” it at once is and is not. The ancient dialecticians must be granted the contradictions that they pointed out in motion; but it does not follow that therefore there is no motion, but on the contrary, that motion is *existent* contradiction itself.

HEGEL 1969: 440

Nietzsche was no less preoccupied with contradictions and in fact often seemed content to give the impression that he was toying with contradictions, turning his entire oeuvre into a site of hectic ping-pong movement between wildly conflicting statements and affirmations, wearing masks, asserting supposed Truths only to demolish them shortly thereafter, etc. This is Nietzsche in the familiar guise of the forefather of postmodernist irreverence. What is absent, however, in Nietzsche’s contradictions is precisely the key notion, for Hegel and Marx, of forward movement. For this, Nietzsche substitutes an element of stasis, of contradictions resisting any prospect of sublation.

This contradictory basis they have in common means that it is not very helpful to approach Marx and Nietzsche with an eye to straightforward definitions, for these are likely to mislead us. Even as they will capture some truth, they will tend to efface the contradiction. The simplest and apparently unproblematic epithets – for example, ‘Marx was revolutionary,’ ‘Nietzsche was a defender of the status quo’ – will fall short of the mark.

2 Marx and the Social Individual

Take Marx, to begin with. Possibly the safest way to define Marx would be as ‘a revolutionary anti-capitalist.’ Yet, as is well known, Marx had a lot of *positive* things to say about capitalism and the bourgeois mode of production, on whose productive and dynamical prowess he showered effusive praise in *The Communist Manifesto*, which was repeated in later works such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, where one frequently reads of capital’s ‘civilizing aspects,’ its ‘civilizing mission,’ its ‘historic mission,’ and so on and so forth. While this is common knowledge relatively few commentators have attempted to pursue this and ask what exactly Marx had meant when affixing the adjective ‘civilizing’ to capitalism. One common way of coming to terms with such utterances – apart from skipping over them with embarrassed silence – is to see them as reflections of Marx’s weak side: he was after all a child his time, a Victorian, and therefore could not but have shared some of the common beliefs and prejudices of the

age, such as faith in the progressive march of history, a celebration of productivity, or a Promethean view of human empowerment. Probably the pithiest formulation of that critique, although one which would have Marx's thought discredited entirely, is Michel Foucault's famous jibe that 'Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else' (Foucault 1994: 262).

Taking issue with such assumptions, I will argue that Marx held these beliefs to a large extent *against* the spirit of the age. The second half of the 19th century was not, after all, the classical age of the belief in progress – that was rather the 18th century, finding its unsurpassable formulations in Turgot and Condorcet. The more the 19th century unfolds, in fact, and especially following the traumatic revolutionary wave of 1848, the belief in progress wanes, and disillusion and doubt increasingly set in. This is a time of deeply pessimist innovations when ideologies of fall and decline, cultural, social, and racial, start to incubate which will fully mature towards the end of the century and in the first half of the 20th century. In 1852, the first edition of Count Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* is published, representing a major instance of conservative lament over the alleged deterioration of the social stock in a Europe which seems to be rapidly succumbing to democracy. But even in liberal circles the mood is far from buoyant. Consider J.S. Mill's morose diagnosis of massified modernity:

[T]he general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind. In ancient history, in the middle ages, and in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself [...]. At present individuals are lost in the crowd. In politics [the] only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of the masses.

MILL 1998: 73

Modernity is regarded by Mill as a progressive *retrogression* of the individualistic spirit, and his ideal of individualism lies in the *past*. His narrative is an inversion of conventional Whig history: individualism, that hallowed liberal tenet, was at its peak in ancient history and in the middle ages; from then on, up to 'the present time,' is a sad story of individual disempowerment, narrowing of personal initiative, and the rise of collectivism. Mill warns against the crippling collectivism sweeping over England and the prospect of Chinese-like stagnation; only the reemergence of genuine, towering individuals which once

have made England great might 'prevent its decline' (Mill 1998: 78–79). There is thus little trace of a stout Victorian faith in progress in *On Liberty*, written in 1859.

At almost exactly the same time (1857–1858), and also in England, Marx is tackling the same phenomena from a very different vantage-point, in the *Grundrisse*. Instructively, Marx's understanding of individualism forms nearly the converse of Mill's. To be sure, Marx is a biting detractor of the notion that free-market capitalism signifies the free development of individuals, let alone the historical peak in the unfolding of individualism. This notion is deconstructed already in the *Manifesto*, where, against the bourgeois catchwords of 'individualism' and 'culture,' it is asserted that, 'in bourgeois society, capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality,' and that the 'culture, the loss of which [the bourgeois] laments, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine' (Marx and Engels 2005: 62, 64). Ten years later, the insistence that bourgeois individualism is a sham is repeated almost verbatim: 'It is not individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free' (Marx 1993: 650). 'This kind of individual freedom,' Marx adds shortly thereafter (652), is 'the most complete suspension of individual freedom, and the most complete subjugation of individuality under social conditions which assume the form of objective powers, even of overpowering objects – of things independent of the relations among individuals themselves.'

Even as Mill and Marx criticize modern individualism, their premises are diametrically opposed. Mill is concerned by the alleged disappearance of the genius, the unique individual vanquished by the masses, whereas Marx is indifferent to the fate of the purported genius, and laments instead the subjugation of ordinary people, the way they are systematically prevented from developing their individualities. But the contrast between their respective outlooks goes deeper still: given their antagonistic social perspectives, they must also take a completely different view of the state of individualism in the past and of its future prospects. Since Mill essentially defends the ruling classes, it is natural that he should wistfully evoke those past epochs when the chasm between the individuals of the elite and the masses was much wider. In his account, capitalist modernity stands accused for empowering the masses. And it is precisely in that sense that Marx is driven to *defend capitalist modernity*, albeit at all times dialectically. If modern individualism, for Marx, is profoundly insufficient and underdeveloped, this is true *only* when measured up against the yardstick of absolute human potential, to be further developed in the communistic future. Compared with *the past*, the bourgeois order signifies a great qualitative *advance* in individualism. Marx's position is worth quoting at some length:

Universally developed individuals [...] are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities. In earlier stages of development, the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness, or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself. It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill.

MARX 1993: 162

Individualism, indeed, is an upshot of bourgeois modernity, a corollary of bourgeois relations of production and exchange. The task for the future is to build on the emerging *universality* of the individual, while combating her present *alienation*. One must fiercely criticize individualism as presently exists, but to lament the historical decline of individualism makes no sense (apart from an ideological and functional sense, obviously). Notice how the following, renowned passage from the *Grundrisse*, forms the negative image of the historical portrait drawn in *On Liberty*:

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan [*Stamm*]; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of the clan. Only in the eighteenth century, in “civil society,” do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal,² not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.

MARX 1993: 84

² ‘A political animal’ appears originally in Greek.

Mill wishes to arrest history: shield the individual from massification, limit democracy, etc. Marx, on the contrary, urges history to *go further*. The cause of individualism can be served only by allowing history to run its course. Whereas Mill, and later Nietzsche in a still more emphatic and indiscriminating way, denounces modernity as the era of the herd-animal, Marx, in a notable passage, argues that modernity is an individualistic *disbanding* of the herd:

[H]uman beings become individuals only through the process of history. He appears originally as a *species-being* [*Gattungswesen*], *clan being*, *herd animal* [...]. Exchange itself is a chief means of this individuation [*Ver-einzelnung*]. It makes the herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it.

MARX 1993: 496

Where the likes of Mill, Tocqueville and Nietzsche fear collectivism, Marx identifies the promise of what he calls 'the social individual.' In marked contrast to notable future Nietzscheans such as Max Weber and Werner Sombart, who idealized earlier stages of capitalist production and invested them with all sorts of ethical and spiritual advantages,³ the emergence of the social individual envisaged by Marx, while a mere embryonic phenomenon to be fully materialized in the future, is unthinkable without the thorough socialization of production brought about by properly modern, large-scale industry:

In this transformation, it is [...] the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. The *theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based*, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself.

MARX 1993: 705

Mass production, for Marx, was demeaning but also potentially emancipating: it propelled the socialization of work to a degree never before imagined, up to the point where no longer the isolated individual creates but society, society becoming the individual. In that regard, too, capitalism was sowing – '*malgre lui*' against its intentions – the seeds of the future.⁴ Paradoxically, Marx, the

³ See, for example, Weber (2002); Sombart (2003 [1913]: 201–202).

⁴ For a useful definition of this 'objective socialization of production' see Mandel (1978: 595).

most trenchant critic of capitalism, was much more *sanguine* about the future of ‘civilization’ than most of his pro-capitalist bourgeois counterparts. And not merely on account of his faith in the imminent proletarian revolution which will brush aside bourgeois society and its iniquities. It is important to acknowledge the full import of the fact that for Marx the prime revolutionary force in bourgeois society, and *in many ways against* it, is ‘the living contradiction,’ capital itself (Marx 1993: 421). These insights were later integrated into Marx’s mature argument, unfolded in *Capital*. I provide just two examples:

Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative. [...] [L]arge scale industry, through its very catastrophes, makes the recognition of variation of labour and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death. [...] That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, [...] must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labour required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of a specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual [...].

MARX 1990: 617–618

This ‘transformation,’ Marx adds immediately, ‘has developed spontaneously from the foundation provided by large-scale industry.’ Similarly, in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx emphasizes that it ‘is one of the civilizing aspects of capital that it extorts this surplus labour in a manner and in conditions that are more advantageous to social relations and to the creation of elements for a new and higher formation than was the case under the earlier forms of slavery, serfdom, etc.’ (Marx, 1991: 958). Significantly, in the very next page of this edition, Marx goes on to delineate the move from a realm of necessity to a realm of freedom. Capitalism points, and actively moves, beyond itself. Marx sticks to a progressive philosophy of history not because he was a Victorian at heart but because he glimpsed in it the overcoming of Victorianism:

[I]t is evident that the [...] the abundant development of the social individual –that the development of the productive forces brought about by the historical development of capital itself, when it reaches a certain point, suspends the self-realization of capital, instead of positing it.

MARX 1993: 749

This understanding of capitalism as preparing the ground for a higher form of individualism, is merely one of many aspects in which Marx reveals himself far more appreciative of the possibilities of progress contained within, and by capitalism, than most bourgeois thinkers. Alternatively put, they realize such possibilities as keenly as he does, but *fear* their emancipatory and subversive nature. They, too, can perceive the contours of the realm of freedom outlined at the historical horizon and, for that very reason, being not progressive but conservative, they turn their back on history, idealize pre-history, or think how to forestall the coming of utopia, launch a *counter*-movement of one sort or another. Many of Marx's contemporaries turned *against progress* not because it failed to keep its promise of greater equality to the masses, but because it seemed to be delivering just that. Two such notable contemporaries were Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, who were amongst the earliest and staunchest critics of progress. To Poe, democracy signified the ignominious rule of the mob while Baudelaire (1972: 193), discussing Poe's work, once called progress 'that grand heresy of decrepitude.' But let us now turn to another great critic of progress: Friedrich Nietzsche.

3 Nietzsche's Noisy Quietism

Nietzsche was the formidable, most versatile and innovative thinker of the bourgeoisie in its defensive phase. He was acutely aware of the profound transformations, both revolutionary and evolutionary, that society was going through, and of the contradictions which underlay them. These contradictions, in turn, impelled the contradictions in his own writings.

On the one hand, Nietzsche emerges as a quintessentially conservative thinker, resisting the tides of change, shoring up the status quo. This is the Nietzsche who throughout his writings, with relentless repetitions and in a myriad of slightly-altered formulations, had advanced the idea that any attempt to challenge the present socioeconomic hierarchy and transcend it would be 'life-denying' 'unnatural,' 'world-slandering,' etc. 'All ideals are dangerous,' he once maintained, 'because they debase and brand the actual' (Nietzsche 1968: 130).

But why, from a Nietzschean perspective, should 'the actual' *not* be debased and branded? After all, was not Nietzsche supposed to be committed, rather, to an iconoclastic devastation of all systems, lending his irreverent skepticism to a *demolition* of all actualities? This is the Nietzsche who philosophizes with a hammer, frontally assaulting the status quo, the 'radical' Nietzsche, whose 'libertarian magic' had appealed to so many people on the left, deeply affecting 'Socialism, anarchism, feminism, the generational revolt of the young' (Aschheim 1994: 6).

It is tempting to see in this patent contradiction a confirmation of Nietzsche as a playful thinker, shifting and restless, defying the laws of philosophical and logical gravity, whose mission is to deflate all Truths and destabilize all systems.⁵ Arguably more productive, however, is to see Nietzsche as a *static thinker*, facing a *reality in motion*. Being, as Marx (1993: 706) put it, ‘the moving contradiction,’ capitalism was dragging Nietzsche along. So if you wanted to defend the status quo, preserve hierarchy, prevent revolution, you could not afford to just stand still. The status quo itself was changing, was dynamic, and pointed towards a new society and the social individual. So in order to stay put, Nietzsche was forced to become, to apply a later term, a conservative revolutionary, like many of his most salient 20th-century right-wing successors, such as Oswald Spengler or Ernst Jünger. That straightforward conservatism had become unfeasible, was admitted by Nietzsche when he whispered – note the intimacy! – ‘In the ear of conservatives’:

What was formerly not known, what is known today or could be known – a *reversion*, a turning back in any sense and to any degree, is quite impossible. [...] [E]ven today there are parties whose goal is a dream of the crabwise *retrogression* of all things. But no one is free to be a crab. There is nothing for it: one *has* to go forward, which is to say *step by step further into décadence* (– this is *my* definition of modern ‘progress’...).

NIETZSCHE 1990a: 108

The paradoxical essence of Nietzsche’s radical stasis might be captured by Lampedusa’s immortal turn of phrase from *Il Gattopardo*: ‘Se vogliamo che *tutto* rimanga come è, bisogna che *tutto* cambi’ [if we want everything to remain as it is, everything must change].

On the one hand, Nietzsche was militantly affirmative of capitalism. He envisioned human society as inexorably enacting the universal, competitive struggle for existence of nature, engulfed in a blind, perpetual collision of forces and wills. This incorporated the tragic substratum of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, yet Nietzsche discarded his former masters’ resigned pessimism in favor of an affirmation of ‘Promethean’ heroism. This grand activity remained tragic and circular, offering no final redemptive vista, yet through it those human beings could experience sublimity who were bold enough to embrace, rather than deny, the cosmic tragedy. To be sure, throughout his career Nietzsche maintained that only a small minority of human beings could actually

5 Which is how postmodernist interpreters typically construe him. For classic examples see, Derrida (1986) and White (1990).

muster the spiritual resources needed to unflinchingly accept the tragic view of the world and revel in it, a manly, aristocratic élite, whereas the masses cannot but take a ‘womanish flight from all that was grave and frightening,’ opting instead for a ‘senile and slavish enjoyment of life and cheerfulness’ (Nietzsche 1999: 57). And at least to begin with such an opposition was also rendered in terms of the difference between the virile Aryans and the mendacious, moralistic Semites. As Nietzsche affirmed in the same book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999: 50), ‘What distinguishes the Aryan conception is the sublime view that *active sin* is the true Promethean virtue; thereby we have also found the ethical foundation of pessimistic tragedy, its *justification* of the evil in human life.’ The valiant ‘reflective Aryan,’ in contradistinction to the timorous Semite, is able to come to terms with the ‘curse in the nature of things, [...] the contradiction at the heart of the world,’ and make them his own (51):

The double essence of Aeschylus’ Prometheus [...] could therefore be expressed like this: ‘All that exists is just and unjust and is equally justified in both respects.’

That is your world. That you call a world.

It should not be thought that such ‘Prometheanism’ was reserved to spiritual and artistic pursuits, shunning political and, especially, economic matters. Far from it, Nietzsche’s tragic vision of the world centrally included the fundamental institutions of capitalism, whose operations, too, were sanctified as integral to the Dionysian, afflicted-cum-magnificent reality, and postulated as eternal and inevitable.⁶ Private property, to begin with, Nietzsche (1968: 77) justified in the following terms:

But there will always be too many who have possessions for socialism to signify more than an attack of sickness – and those who have possessions are of one mind on one article of faith: ‘one must possess something in order to be something.’

Directly continuing, Nietzsche went beyond a mere confirmation of private property, and ontologized accumulation, too:

But this is the oldest and healthiest of all instincts: I should add, ‘one must want to have more than one has in order to become more.’ For this

⁶ For my interpretation of Nietzsche’s essential commitment to capitalism see more in Landa (2007). The present discussion of Nietzsche partly draws on materials which were first published in this book.

is the doctrine preached by life itself to all that has life: the morality of development. To have and to want to have more – growth, in one word – that is life itself.

Nietzsche here made capitalism practically interchangeable with life. Exploitation, to complete the picture, he deemed no less rooted in life, forming a biological compulsion beyond the reach of history and impervious to any conceivable social transformation:

[L]ife itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation [...]. 'Exploitation' does not pertain to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it pertains to the essence of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will to life.

NIETZSCHE 1990b: 194

The basic algorithm of capitalism, conceived indeed as a ruthless and competitive system, Nietzsche (1968: 164) enshrined as 'the grand economy, which cannot do without evil.'

On the other hand, however, capitalism terrified Nietzsche, and this precisely because he shared something of Marx's dialectical vision of capitalism, albeit in a highly abstract form. It is useful, when reading the following passage, to bear in mind how the developments which filled Nietzsche with deep pessimism and distrust of the future, were a source of hope for Marx:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. [...] For some time now, our whole European culture, has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.

NIETZSCHE 1968: 3

That is why Nietzsche is compelled to instigate a countermovement, promote a radical 'reevaluation of all values,' and preach the overman, all in order to somehow change the tide of historical development. This consciously counter-historic commitment has received a powerful earlier expression in Nietzsche's

youthful treatise *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874). In direct polemics against Hegelianism, Nietzsche extols 'the great fighters *against history*,' those heroic individuals who dare to defy the laws of history. Any possible virtue, for Nietzsche (1997: 106), 'becomes a virtue through rising against the blind power of the factual and the tyranny of the actual and by submitting to laws that are not the laws of the fluctuations of history. It always swims against the tides of history.' It will be recalled, in passing, how this very same author, who is here combating 'the tyranny of the actual,' elsewhere inveighed precisely against those who 'debase and brand the actual.' The contradiction is clarified, however, once it is born in mind that in the present case Nietzsche combats 'the actual' as that which is in the process of *becoming*, brought along by the current of history. In the former case, he defended 'the actual' precisely as the present state of things, threatened by historical developments. Nietzsche's moments of optimism tellingly draw on the anticipation of a successful *derailing* of history. As in *Ecce Homo*:

A tremendous hope speaks out of this writing. [...] Let us look a century ahead, let us suppose that my *attentat* on two millennia of anti-nature and the violation of man succeeds. That party of life which takes in hand the greatest of all tasks, the higher breeding of humanity, together with the remorseless extermination of all degenerate and parasitic elements, will again make possible on earth that *superfluity of life* out of which the dionysian condition must again proceed.

NIETZSCHE 1992: 51–52⁷

Paradoxically, Marx, the revolutionary, never pretended to be able to change history singlehandedly, nor did he wish to derail it; he expressly disowned the notion that communism aims to reshape reality in agreement with some ideal or moral system; his goal was rather to assist the revolutionary transformation which is already in the making.⁸ It was Nietzsche, the conservative, who was forced to plan an *attentat*, and elsewhere likened himself to a dynamite.

In a sense, Nietzsche was yearning for a capitalism that will no longer be 'a moving contradiction,' a static one, that will not lead towards transcendence. The doctrine of 'eternal recurrence' gave expression to this hope. For Georg Lukács, this was 'the pith of Nietzschean philosophy,' whose key social purpose was to deny 'that history could produce anything that was new in principle (such as socialism after the class society),' and provide the 'decisive counter-idea

⁷ I have changed the translation of *Vernichtung* from 'destruction,' to 'extermination.'

⁸ Cf. Marx and Engels (2005: 59).

to the concept of becoming. This counter balance was needed because 'Becoming cannot give rise to something new' (Lukács 1952). Since Lukács's critique of Nietzsche's 'indirect apologetics of capitalism' has itself been the target of harsh criticism ever since the publication of the *Destruction of Reason*, notably by a condescending Adorno (1980), it might be useful to recall that long before Lukács Walter Benjamin had reached rather similar conclusions: 'The notion of eternal return appeared at a time when the bourgeoisie no longer dared count on the impending development of the system of production which they had set going' (Benjamin 1999: 117). While doubtlessly far more indebted than Lukács to the German romantic tradition, including its Nietzschean variant,⁹ Benjamin was also quite clear on Nietzsche's affinities with both capitalism – 'The Paradigm of capitalist religious thought is magnificently formulated in Nietzsche's philosophy' (Benjamin 1996: 289) – and imperialism.¹⁰

Nietzsche's theories offered the paradox of a noisy and frenzied quietism. Capitalism was affirmed mythopoeically but, crucially, without its transformative and self-destructive side. In 1886, approximating the zenith of his philosophical career, Nietzsche looked back at his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and saw behind this early effort the bold celebration of a new, amoral artist-god. It so happens, that this artist-god is uncannily analogous to the classical Marxist description of capitalism, containing all its crucial contradictions – save one:

Indeed, the whole book acknowledges only an artist's meaning (and hidden meaning) behind all that happens – a "god," if you will, but certainly only an utterly unscrupulous and amoral artist-god, who frees himself from the dire pressure of fullness and *over-fullness*, from suffering the oppositions packed within him, and who wishes to become conscious of his autarchic power and constant delight and desire, whether he is building or destroying, whether acting benignly or malevolently. The world as the release and redemption of god, *achieved* at each and every moment, as the eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most suffering being of all, the being most full of oppositions and contradictions, able to redeem and release itself only in *semblance*.

NIETZSCHE 1999: 8

⁹ See, for an extended discussion, McFarland (2013).

¹⁰ See, for a brief statement, Benjamin (1999: 117). For two detailed expositions on Nietzsche's affinity and support for imperialism, see Domboswky (2014) and Conway (2002).

Does not Nietzsche inadvertently or covertly provides us here with a description/celebration, of capitalism, with its abounding power to 'build and destroy,' its restless, frenzied 'eternal changing,' its circular crises of 'fullness and over-fullness,' and its inner 'oppositions and contradictions' which it is able to solve 'only in semblance'? The crucial contradiction that is missing, of course, is the one involving *self*-destruction. Capitalism should be allowed to destroy everything but not prove to be the grave digger of the bourgeoisie. In this way, the unpleasant vicissitudes of capitalism could be presented to modern humans as divine and awe-striking; the working of an artist-god was supposed to be evident precisely in the chaotic arbitrariness of this mode of production, in its uncontrollability, periodic circular crises and disregard for human needs.

Such a reading of Nietzsche as apologizing for capitalism might be criticized for taking too much of a poetic license in its approach to a passage which, after all, does not directly engage economics. And it certainly differs from the conventional exegetic wisdom that would have us believe that Nietzsche was a thinker fundamentally aloof from worldly concerns and certainly not interested in justifying a system as vulgar as capitalism. Such common views, however, disregard Nietzsche's strong interest in socio-economic matters and the fact that he was fairly well read in contemporary literature dealing with political economy; indeed, while he may not have read Marx's writings directly, he knew of Marx's economic and political theories from several sources, some of which have discussed and cited Marx extensively, and in one of which he had even underlined Marx's name.¹¹ Hence the frequent economic overtones of Nietzsche's rhetoric, even when writing on seemingly metaphysical or cultural matters, should by no means be neglected or considered merely fortuitous.¹² Take the following sentence where Nietzsche affirms that 'in order for there to be a broad, deep, fertile soil for the development of art, the overwhelming majority has to be slavishly subjected to life's necessity in the service of the minority [...]. At their expense, through their extra work, that privileged class is to be removed from the struggle for existence, in order to produce and satisfy a new world of necessities.' The striking resemblance to the socialist, indeed Marxist vocabulary, the talk of the 'extra work' [Mehrarbeit] extracted from the workers, is not a fluke but stems from his specific opposition to socialist theories.

11 For details see Brobjer (2002). For a very useful discussion of Nietzsche's familiarity with political economy and his indirect dialogue with Marx see Nicolás González Varela's insightful and detailed discussion and analysis (2010).

12 For an insightful discussion of the significance of economics within Nietzsche's theories of *Bildung*, and the way key economic tropes such as circulation, debt and exchange inform even some of Nietzsche's most metaphysical ideas, see Cooper (2008).

The same mythopoeic reflection of capitalism is found elsewhere. Consider the last section of *The Will to Power*, a highly charged passage (1885) from which I extract just a few sentences:

And do you know what 'the world' is to me? Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; [...] out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord, [...] blessing itself as that which must return eternally [...]: this, my *Dionysian* world [...], without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal, unless a ring feels good will toward itself [...].

NIETZSCHE 1968: 549–550

Nietzsche's yearning is again for a status quo which is really static, or rather utterly dynamic, but in a circular way. As beautifully put by Tony McKenna (2013: 403), Nietzsche's vision centers on the proposition of 'a revolution without revolution, an event risen from a never ending historical slip-stream in which everything is flux but nothing is change.' Robert Wicks' is also right in pointing out the way that Nietzsche, objectively, apologizes for the deficiencies of the present social system; the author, moreover, usefully juxtaposes such apologia with the Hegelian and Marxist critical and transformative project. 'Nietzsche,' he writes, 'did not glorify the world in the socially and morally traditional manner of Hegel or Marx, for he did not envision a heaven on earth where justice and peaceful community would prevail. Nietzsche's aesthetic glorification involved taking what appears to be a disappointingly imperfect, mediocre and mundane situation and reinterpreting it as a sublime situation' (Wicks 2005: 116). Similarly, Stephen Houlgate perceptively compared Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy with that of Hegel and found it lacking since, unlike Hegel who drew from the fate of the tragic hero a lesson about the need to transform social relations, Nietzsche eschewed any such prospect, and instead used the hero to justify the status quo. 'Nietzsche,' wrote Houlgate (1986: 216), 'does not tie tragic suffering directly to human responsibility, so the individual does not feel the tragic destructiveness of life as essentially his own, but always "overcomes" it, covers it up or pushes it away in the very act of affirming it.' This leads the author to the conclusion that, for Nietzsche, 'tragedy celebrates the heroism of confrontation' (Houlgate 1986: 218).

The fact should not be overlooked that Nietzsche in the passage quoted above does not simply claim to reflect cosmic and social realities such as they actually are or necessarily must be. Quite the contrary, he virtually admits that this is the world and society as *he* would like them to be, that he is presenting us with an ideal, rather than a fact: 'what "the world" is *to me*,' 'Shall I show it to

you in *my mirror*, 'my Dionysian world,' etc. Nietzsche advanced a political project which was meant to counter the way the world, in his estimation, was *actually* shaping up. Nor was Nietzsche's vision truly atheistic. It was not the case that there was no longer a divine authority to which agonizing humanity could turn in its distress. In the new myth that Nietzsche sought to inculcate, god was not really dead; it was *god himself*, rather, who lavishly inflicted all sorts of misery on humanity to satisfy his artistic impulses. However, since Nietzsche was well aware that his 'amoral artist-God,' his 'Dionysos,' was by no means omnipotent, he prompted human beings to actively assist him in preserving the sand-like instability and precariousness of their social ground: 'If the individuals are to become stronger, society must remain in a *state of emergency*, always in the expectance of great variations: lead a *continually provisional existence*.' (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 9: 426) The ultra capitalist commitment behind these words is thrown into a strong relief once it is taken into account that they were written in polemics against none other than Herbert Spencer, the very coiner of 'the-survival-of-the-fittest' catchphrase, whose position Nietzsche nonetheless deemed too utilitarian and heedful of society, weakening individual competition, and hence leading to 'humanity's decline.'

This furnishes another example of how Nietzsche's contradictions differ from Marx's. Like Marx, Nietzsche was highly ambivalent about capitalism. Yet he rejected precisely those elements and patterns of development characteristic of capitalism which pressed beyond it or, at the very least, seemed destined to transform capitalism into a far more egalitarian and peaceful system. Nietzsche's contempt at utilitarianism as decadent was therefore an attempt to neutralize what was considered the decaying element in bourgeois culture and politics, which may eventually eat into the foundations of the class system and veer towards democracy and socialism. In other words, Nietzsche rebuked the bourgeoisie for *not being capitalistic enough*, or, interchangeably, for being capitalistic on account of the wrong, practical, comfort and safety-seeking reasons.¹³ Utilitarianism, according to Nietzsche, was merely a democratic prelude to socialism, as attested to particularly by its emphasis on 'the happiness of the greatest number.' In that respect Nietzsche's cultural critique of philistine bourgeois complacency and timidity was broadly anticipative of, indeed was often directly emulated by such proto-fascist thinkers as Tommaso Marinetti,

13 Michael Kilivris (2011) is therefore right to claim that Nietzsche was in many respects anti-capitalist, but wrong to conclude from this that he cannot therefore be regarded 'a bourgeois ideologue.' On the contrary, it was precisely as a bourgeois ideologue that Nietzsche was repelled by certain aspects of capitalism and driven to embrace a neo-aristocratic stance.

who protested against the ‘timid clerical conservatism symbolized by the bedroom slippers and the hot water bottle,’ favoring instead the heroic hygiene of war (in Joll 1973: 127); or Vilfredo Pareto, who found that the liberal institution of democracy is conducive to the survival of *the weakest*: ‘Going along to the polling station to vote is a very easy business, and if by so doing one can procure food and shelter, then everybody – especially the unfit, the incompetent and the idle – will rush to do it’ (in Joll 1973: 130–131).

4 The Task of the Last Human

Nietzsche’s problem, of course, was the mismatch between his ideal of the capitalist ‘joy of the circle’ and contemporary reality, where the world appeared dangerously close to breaking out of what many had experienced as a vicious, rather than a joyous circle; that the social individual was knocking on the door.

In order to try and preempt any such possibility he attempted to dystopianize the social individual by rewriting him disparagingly as ‘the Last Human.’ Instead of leading humanity to new cultural summits, modernity signifies a social and economic leveling down, the formation of a mass society at the heart of which stands

the most contemptible human: and that is the Last Human. [...] The earth has become small, and upon it hops the Last Human, who makes everything small. His race is as inexterminable as the flea; the Last Human lives longest. [...] Nobody grows rich or poor anymore: both are too much of a burden. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both are too much of a burden. No herdsman and one herd.

NIETZSCHE 1969: 45–46¹⁴

The Last Human epitomizes the nightmare of social subversion, an egalitarian dystopia, consisting of increased consumption and mass happiness – Zarathustra says that the Last Humans ‘still work, for work is entertainment. [...] They have their little pleasure for the day and their little pleasure for the

14 Here and in the next citation I occasionally depart from Richard J. Hollingdale’s translation, consulting the original German. The Last Humans are usually rendered the Last Men in English, yet this is problematic, since the German term is the gender neutral *Mensch*, encompassing both men and women. In reality, in view of their alleged deterioration and loss of vigor, the Last Humans – in Nietzsche’s terms – can be said to be more womanly and effeminate than virile.

night: but they respect health. “We have discovered happiness,” say the Last Humans and blink’ (Nietzsche 1969: 47).

And, at bottom, are not the Last Human and the social individual one and the same individual, regarded from the opposing sides of the social and ideological divide? What in Marx is affirmed as a positive vision of the future, when a multi-faceted, highly socialized and creative human being will come into her own, capable of various enjoyments and having multiple free time at her disposal, is scoffed at by Nietzsche as a plebeian elimination of excellence, heroism, and everything that makes life worthwhile. In general, from a Nietzschean perspective the gains of the social individual are dismissed or ridiculed. For example, the fact that knowledge is held in common and is collectively accumulated through time, absorbing the formidable efforts and contributions of multiple individuals, was both taken for granted and saluted by Hegel and Marx. For Hegel, famously, ‘what in former ages engaged the attention of men of mature mind, has been reduced to the level of facts, exercises, and even games for children; and, in the child’s progress through school, we shall recognize the history of the cultural development of the world traced, as it were, in a silhouette’ (Hegel, 1977: 16). From a Nietzschean vantage-point, however, such diffusion of knowledge arouses indignation, and is construed as the thankless usurpation of the works of geniuses by undeserving masses. ‘Just look at these superfluous people!’ sneers Zarathustra: ‘They steal for themselves the works of inventors and the treasures of the wise: they call their theft culture – and they turn everything to sickness and calamity’ (Nietzsche 1969: 77). Reading a Nietzschean-inspired communist like Alain Badiou (2002: 70), for example, one gets the impression that this process has something scandalous about it: ‘[I]t is the eternal destiny of the most astonishing mathematical inventions to wind up in college textbooks.’¹⁵ Where else, one is tempted to ask, should they wind up?

Given Nietzsche’s agonistic scheme, in which one person’s gain cannot but be another’s loss – for ‘person’ one might just as well read ‘class’ here – widespread excellence and horizontally distributed knowledge are discredited as ‘mediocrity’ and the rule of the herd. Hence Nietzsche’s profound suspicion of, often outright hostility, to universal education, which he associated with creeping Hegelianism, socialism and worse. ‘Universal education,’ he averred early on (1871), ‘is but a preparatory stage of communism. Education is so weakened that it can no longer bestow any privileges. Least of all is it a means against communism. Universal education, i.e. barbarism, is the precondition of communism.’ (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 7: 243) Significantly, Nietzsche goes on to

15 For my view of Badiou as indebted to Nietzsche, see Landa (2013).

lament the way universal education breeds the consumerism of the Last Humans – without using the exact term, which he coined much later – a mass hedonism which he associates, furthermore, with the demands of Lassalle. The socialist agitator is accused of having taught the common people that ‘having no needs is the greatest infelicity,’ and instilling them with a lust for ‘luxury and fashion’ as opposed to *Kultur*. This explains, for Nietzsche, the pernicious tendency of the workers’ educational associations to ‘generate needs.’ (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 7: 243) The multiplication of state educational institutions and their inclusion of wider sections of the population Nietzsche diagnoses as the result of fear of ‘the aristocratic nature of real education’ (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 1: 710).

To be sure, in his criticism of the educational system of the triumphant Second Reich, Nietzsche had also pointed out many of the limitations of this system, notably its serviceability to the state and to commercial purposes. Consider the following passage from *Schopenhauer as Educator* (1874), where the detrimental cultural and educational effect of ‘*the greed of the money-makers*’ is denounced:

[A]s much knowledge and education as possible, therefore as much demand as possible, therefore as much production as possible, therefore as much happiness and profit as possible – that is the seductive formula. Education would be defined by its adherents as the insight by means of which, through demand and its satisfaction, one becomes time-bound through and through but at the same time best acquires all the ways and means of making money as easily as possible. The goal would then be to create as many current human beings as possible, in the sense in which one speaks of a coin as being current [...].

NIETZSCHE 1997: 164

These are problems which continue to vitiate education under capitalist states to our days, when the scope of free inquiry is narrowed, and the very legitimacy of the humanities is questioned under pretexts of lack of practicality and profitability, to say nothing of the charges of *counter-productive*, critical thinking. This might convey the impression that Nietzsche can serve as an ally of the humanities in the struggle against ‘instrumental reason’ and many scholars have indeed pursued such reasoning (for a recent example, see Church [2015] especially Chapter 5, dealing with ‘The Education to Culture’). Such readings, however, typically downplay, when they not outright obliterate, the profoundly conservative wider context in which Nietzsche’s defense of ‘culture’ was embedded, and the way it was conceived first and foremost to buttress social and cultural hierarchies. What ultimately concerned Nietzsche, in other words,

was not to defend culture from oppressive capitalism but rather from the oppressed masses. 'If culture were really left to the discretion of the people,' he made clear during the same, early period, in the essay *The Greek State*, 'the cry of pity' would tear 'down the walls of culture; the urge for justice, for equal sharing of the pain, would swamp all other ideas' (Nietzsche 1994: 178–179). A closer scrutiny of Nietzsche's critique of the commercialization and standardization of education reveals that it is primarily a critique of its *democratization*. Standardization and instrumentalization of the masses cannot form Nietzsche's true grievance with capitalist education for two simple reasons: he assumes, complementarily if incoherently, that (1) the broad masses are by their very nature irretrievably mediocre and 'current,' and hence cannot really be turned into such by bad education, and (2) that their mediocrity, far from being lamentable, is actually salutary and indispensable for the proliferation of genuine culture and the ascendancy of 'the genius,' and must therefore be deliberately encouraged and inculcated. The late Nietzsche (1968: 462) thus writes, for instance, that 'A high culture can stand only upon a broad base, upon a strong and healthy consolidated mediocrity [...]. The power of the middle is, further, upheld by trade, above all trade in money: the instinct of great financiers goes against everything extreme,' and elsewhere assures his readers (1990b: 193) that 'the essential thing in a good and healthy aristocracy is [...] that it does *not* feel itself to be a function (of the monarchy or of the commonwealth) but as their *meaning* and supreme justification – that it therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of innumerable men who *for its sake* have to be oppressed and reduced to imperfect men, to slaves and instruments.'

Universal education is thus ultimately criticized by Nietzsche not on account of its serviceability to capitalism but, on the very contrary, because it mounts a formidable challenge to capitalism and the entire class system. As Nietzsche averred in a polemic against socialism from 1877, by spreading education among the masses, the workers, becoming spoiled and refined, can no longer perform their preordained tasks: 'Since a great deal of hard and coarse work must be done, people must be preserved who can perform them [...]. Once the need and refinement of a higher education penetrates the working class, it can no longer do such work, without inordinately suffering from it' (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 8: 481). Again, Nietzsche is bemused and disturbed by the moving contradiction embodied in capitalism: the very effort to instrumentalize the masses dialectically breeds their restlessness. Nietzsche would like to secure the former requirement, which he regards as the pre-condition for all high culture, but eschew the latter, disturbing by-product. 'These are ill-fated times,' he lamented in *The Greek State* (1994: 177), 'when the slave [...] is stirred

up to think about himself and beyond himself! Ill-fated seducers who have destroyed the slave's state of innocence with the fruit of the tree of knowledge!' In short, 'If one wills an end, one must also will the means to it: if one wants slaves, one is a fool if one educates them to be masters' (Nietzsche 1990a: 106). The fundamental problem for the philosopher is thus not the instrumentalization of education under capitalism but precisely the democratization that threatens to bring such instrumentalization to an end.¹⁶

A similar contradiction underpins Nietzsche's critique of 'the coldest of all cold monsters': the state (Nietzsche 1969: 75). This is another element that was seized upon by many protective readers to vouch for Nietzsche's 'anarchist,' and 'anti-totalitarian' spirit. Yet in truth Nietzsche's fierce opposition to 'the new idol' was restricted to the state as an expression of a Hegelian, democratic and popular spirit, dedicated to promoting the welfare of the masses. As Zarathustra (1969: 76) proclaims, 'Many too many are born: the state was invented for the superfluous!' and in 1872, in explicit polemics against Hegel's view of the state as an 'ethical organism,' Nietzsche discards the ideal of a democratic state and pits against it a defiantly aristocratic alternative:

For what purpose does the state need such an excessive number of institutions of education, of teachers? For what purpose this broadly-based education and enlightenment of the people? Because the true German spirit is hated, because the aristocratic nature of real education is feared, because one wishes to drive the great individuals to self-ostracism; one plants and nurtures the pretention of education in the multitude, since one seeks thereby to evade the severe and hard breeding of great leaders, persuading the mass that it will find its own way.

NIETZSCHE 1988, vol. 1: 710

Nietzsche thus rejects the state only inasmuch as it has fallen under the sway of the masses; he opposes it to the extent, indeed, that it is construed as a *new* idol, materializing the 'modern ideas' he viscerally despises of democracy, popular sovereignty, and egalitarianism. The state as an *old* idol, however, whose purpose is to produce 'the genius' by using the masses as tools, Nietzsche ardently promotes as an antidote to modern degeneration. This happens with

16 For a detailed exploration of Nietzsche's approach to the question of education see the excellent and comprehensive study of Nietzsche's political thought, soon to appear in English, by Losurdo (2004) as well as Chapter 5 of González Varela's no less impressive book (2010), incisively analyzing the early Nietzsche's 'reactionary' ideas for future education.

great clarity in *The Greek State*, where Nietzsche derives from the politics of antiquity – freely interpreted, certainly – a counter-democratic social model. The following passage, written in 1871, should serve as a sobering reminder for those wishing to present Nietzsche as a principled enemy of authoritarianism and state coercion. It begins, notably, with a critique of capitalism as *a vehicle of egalitarianism*, a force whose social and cultural implications are radical. The contradictions of capitalism and its partially revolutionary thrust are again borne out by Nietzsche's analysis:

If I point to the use of revolutionary ideas in the service of a self-seeking, stateless money aristocracy as a dangerous characteristic of the contemporary political scene, and if, at the same time, I regard the massive spread of liberal optimism as a result of the fact that the modern money economy has fallen into strange hands, and if I view all social evils, including the inevitable decline of the arts, as either sprouting from that root or enmeshed with it: then you will just have to excuse me if I occasionally sing a paean to war.

NIETZSCHE 1994: 184

Against the incipient 'revolt of the masses' – to borrow José Ortega y Gasset's famous 20th-century term, itself centrally inspired by his readings of the German thinker – Nietzsche then recommends a revival of the state of antiquity, establishing a system in which the masses will be drilled into both labor and military discipline:

[T]hrough war, and in the military profession, we are presented with a type, even perhaps the *archetype of the state*. Here we see as the most general effect of the war tendency, the immediate separation and division of the chaotic masses into *military castes*, from which there arises the construction of a 'war-like society' in the shape of a pyramid on the broadest possible base: a slave-like bottom stratum. The unconscious purpose of the whole movement forces every individual under its yoke [...]. In the higher castes, it becomes a little clearer what is actually happening with this inner process, namely the creation of the *military genius* – whom we have already met as original founder of the state.

The ancient ideal of the promotion of the genius, Nietzsche concludes, should be placed at the heart of the modern state project, displacing the masses into a wholly subservient position, and demonstrating the vacuity of such endemic modern catchphrases as 'dignity of man' and 'dignity of work.' 'But what I have

demonstrated here,' Nietzsche counters (1994: 185), 'is valid in the most general sense: every man, with his whole activity, is only dignified to the extent that he is a tool of genius, consciously or unconsciously.' His reading of Plato reassures Nietzsche, as he wishes to reassure his readers grappling with modern politics, that the *state of the masses* must be superseded by the *state of the genius*: 'The actual aim of the state, the Olympian existence and constantly renewed creation and the preparation of the genius, compared with whom everything else is just a tool, aid and facilitator, is discovered here through poetic intuition and described vividly.'

Nietzsche's mythic dichotomy of the genius vs. the masses, applied across all domains – social, cultural and educational – serves as a useful way of discrediting the advances and achievements of democratic society and presenting its results as somehow depressing, gray, and shorn of genuine value. Yet it conceals the anxious deference to rigid class barriers and the privileges they confer and safeguard; the attack on general mediocrity in the name of the putative excellence of the solitary genius in fact rests on the *reactive* idea that the genius can only shine so bright as long as the masses remain dull enough to serve as its backdrop. Paradoxically, the genius, far from being a self-made individual, rising on account of his formidable gifts, requires the drilling and suppressing of the whole of society, a coordinated work of breeding and discipline: consider the revealing phrase used in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, again carrying economic overtones: 'the production of genius' (Nietzsche 1997: 164). Hence the admittance, *de facto*, that without mediocrity – artificially produced and enforced – the genius cannot prosper: for 'high culture,' as will be recalled, 'can stand only upon a broad base, upon a strong and healthy consolidated mediocrity.' According to the Nietzschean logic, if taken to its ultimate conclusions, in a classroom with one reasonably clever and knowledgeable student and 19 illiterates one finds – *a genius*; a classroom, by contrast, with 20 highly intelligent and learned students, of roughly the same talents, presents us with the sorry spectacle of – *mediocrity*. An illustration of this vantage-point can be gleaned from an instance of popular Nietzscheanism, *The Incredibles*, that won the Oscar for best animated picture of 2004. A specimen of the vast genre of 'superhero' tales, which by its very nature is close to the Nietzschean thematic, the film tells the story of a middle-class family of superheroes, father, mother, and their three little kids, all in possession of remarkable innate super powers, distinguishing them from the multitude. The story's villain is Syndrome, a minute and resentful guy, who yearns to be a superhero himself but possesses no 'super' gifts. All he has is the ability to invent advanced technology which gives him a semblance of super-heroism. Terribly jealous of the family for their enjoyment of the real thing, he captures them and threatens to 'sell my invention

so that everyone could be superhero. Everyone can be super. And when everyone's super – no one will be!' (Bird 2004) This neatly captures the fear that capitalism-cum-socialism will democratize excellence, distribute it amongst the mass, and thereby eliminate it.

5 Conclusion

While the Last Human was meant to ridicule the rise of the social individual, the social individual, in turn, can help us to see the Last Human in a very different light. The Last Human and the social individual are both contradictory and complementary, in that their true meaning emerges at best when they are brought together. It may be apposite to end by juxtaposing two famous statements by Marx and Nietzsche. 'Communism,' Marx wrote in 1844, 'is the riddle of history solved, [das aufgelöste Rätsel der Geschichte] and it knows itself to be this solution' (Marx 1974: 348). Forty-one years later, Nietzsche wrote: 'do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles? [Eine Lösung für alle ihre Rätsel?]' *This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!*' (Nietzsche 1968: 550).

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