

Historical Pessimism

Georges Palante

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Historical pessimism is inspired by a retrospective ideal, an historic or even prehistoric ideal whose nostalgia haunts the thinker disgusted with the present. Two names can be put forward in this regard: de Gobineau and Nietzsche.

Count de Gobineau judges current civilization in the light of an ethnic type that is distant, almost prehistoric, or at least so little historical that it would be disappointing to write its history: the Aryan type. Nevertheless, Count de Gobineau thinks he can follow it throughout its evolution, its transformations and its deviations. "I compared," he says, "races among themselves. I chose one from among them that I saw as the best and I wrote 'The History of the Persians' in order to show, by the example of the Aryan nation the most isolated from its relatives, how powerless differences in climate, environment and circumstances are in changing or inhibiting the genius of a race." His "Discourse on the Inequality of Races" traces the long vicissitudes and the irremediable degeneration of this type of superior humanity as a result of the mixing of bloods that adulterated it. "Ottar Jarl" tells of the ancestry of a Scandinavian hero of the ancient Nordic race from which Gobineau claimed to descend. The novel "The Pleiades" presents a few survivors of the noble Aryan race lost in the midst of unworthy contemporaries, but who don't renounce the fight in this degraded milieu, succeeding in making their presence felt.

What are the moral and intellectual traits that constitute the Gobinien superman? These traits can be found in "The History of the Persians," the "Discourse on the Inequality of Races," in "Ottar Jarl" and "The Pleiades." Gobineau places judgment in the first rank of the qualities that constitute the superior man. What he values in intelligence is not imagination, but judgment. Judgment is the superior characteristic of the Aryan. The Aryan is above all a man of judgment and action. For de Gobineau the true role of intelligence can only be that of a guide to action. The goal of intelligence is not to meditate, to build poems in the air, to withdraw into itself and to think for thinking's sake. The role of intelligence is to see clearly and dictate actions. It should not be forgotten that de Gobineau is the descendant of a line of warriors, of politicians, of diplomats and a diplomat himself. His heredity, his traditions, his experience, his trade all led him to esteem above all else the qualities that constitute a man of action, a leader of men.

According to him the superior man is not the artist or the speculative writer: the superior man is he who is capable of commanding a people or an army, or the skillful diplomat. The qualities that constitute the Gobinien superman find themselves summed up in the portrait of the Viking. "In the personality of Ottar we find three clearly pronounced traits, and it is essential to engrave

them from the start, for we will recognize one or another, if not all of them, in most of his descendants. The activity of intelligence, the 'Vestfolding,' carries it to all the points it can reach and that circumstances place within its sight. He is avid for knowledge, for he wants to know just how far his country extends, but he also doesn't want occasions for gain and profit to be neglected. He is also sensible, for he doesn't believe the speeches of the Bjarmes (priests) without reservation... Along with the activity of the intelligence he has the passion for independence, and on the day he has to submit to Erik's domination he says no and goes into exile. He appreciates the advantages of wealth, but he appreciates even more not having to yield, and yields little. In the third place he is stubborn in his views... Understanding, independent, patient, these are three qualities from which as much good as evil result and are susceptible of diverse applications. In Ottar, issued from a pure race, we find its essence in all sincerity, with the maximum of energy, and exactly as the hero's ancestors possessed it, receiving it from their blood." It is the purity of blood that makes for strong individuality. "His race was pure and so his individuality was very strong. In him individuality was everything, agglomeration little or nothing. On the contrary, among more southern populations the blood had been noticeably altered: in the Franc become half-Roman, in the Roman rotted by Semitic mixtures. Everyone counted on everyone else, and while the Scandinavian, jealous of his liberty, only accepted temporary associations, those they vanquished found it good to hold a master or guide responsible for their will. It is this obedience, which then becomes a servility, that in truth constitutes not human culture – always ennobling – but civilization, vehicle of a contrary effect." Another portrait of the Gobinien superman is that of the Englishman Nore in "The Pleiades." "I am fantastic? Why? Am I less a man because I seem to you different from the model from which my contemporaries are carved? What do they and I have in common? Fantastic? Because I don't care about their grandeur, their baseness, their distinctions, their humiliations, their elections, their means of making a fortune; not their fortunes or their problems! I would be a fantastic creature if, conceiving my desires in accordance with puerile imitation, I mixed in with them the things of common life, ever ready to abandon what are only dreams for banal reality from which I neither knew how to or wanted to detach myself. But thank god nothing like this exists...It is possible that creation, which randomly casts about disparate seeds, erred in my regard and having prepared me for another milieu inadvertently let me fall into this one. But for whatever reason, here I am! I am myself and no other, feeling in my way, understanding things with my own intelligence, and as incapable of renouncing what I once wanted, of abandoning the pursuit of what I desired, as incapable of demonstrating to myself that I was wrong as I am to renounce breathing for an hour!" Energy, independence, strong individualism, an intense sentiment of the personality: such are the traits of the Gobinien superman.

The humanity of today has badly degenerated from this superior type. Good brains and strong wills are rare, for they are in proportion with the excellence of the race. A character in "The Pleiades" says that there are still perhaps 3,000 "sons of kings," superior men of Aryan race, three thousand well made brains and strongly beating hearts. "The rest is a vile mass that makes up the triple tribe of imbeciles, brutes and scoundrels, the current form of European barbarism. Not youthful, brave, daring, picturesque, happy barbarism, but a suspicious, glum, bitter, ugly one that will kill all and create nothing." What is horrible to think about is that these few superior brains, these few strongly beating hearts, lost in the mass, can do nothing to raise up the ruins and bring decadence to a halt. This was seen once before, at the end of the Roman Empire.

“It can be argued of the work of these great men that, despite the universal decomposition, there were yet firm and honest hearts in the Empire. Who denies this? I am speaking of multitudes and not of individuals. Could these noble intelligences stop for one minute the rotting of the social body? No. The most noble intelligences didn’t convert the crowd, didn’t give it heart.” The presence of a few of the Just couldn’t save Sodom. It is the same today. The few survivors of the ancient virtues of the race cannot today stop European decomposition. When the mixing of blood has degraded a race to a certain degree there is nothing to be done. All that is left is to dispassionately witness the death of the race. Such is Gobinen pessimism. A complete, definitive, and hopeless ethnic and social pessimism. We find a strong expression of it in the pages where de Gobineau combats the thesis of humanity’s indefinite progress, as well as in the final pages of the “Essay.” “The prediction that makes us sad is not death, it’s the certitude of arriving there degraded. And perhaps that shame reserved to our descendants would leave us indifferent if we didn’t feel, by a secret horror, that destiny’s rapacious hands are already posed upon us.”

By virtue of the law we seek to establish, Gobinen pessimism turns into individualism. Stoic individualism, isolatedly ferocious, haughty and despairing. The Aryan is always recognized by his indomitable individuality. In the presence of a civilization he hates and holds in contempt he doesn’t resign himself. He stiffens in the haughty attitude of a wounded aristocrat. “I don’t care what will result from your changes,” a character of “The Pleiades” says, in whom it is believed Gobineau incarnated himself, “I don’t know future morals so that I can approve of them, future costumes so I can admire them, future institutions so that I can respect them, and I maintain that what I approve, what I admire, what I love is gone! I have nothing to do with what will succeed them. Consequently, you don’t console me by announcing the triumph of parvenus who I don’t care to know.” The same character says elsewhere: “It doesn’t please me to see a once great people now laid low, impotent, paralyzed, half-rotted, decomposing, surrendered to stupidities, miseries, evil, ferocity, cowardice, the weaknesses of a senile childhood, and good for nothing except death, which I sincerely hope for so that it escape from the dishonor in which it wallows, laughing like imbeciles.” Someone asks of this despairing character: “No religion, no fatherland, no skill, no love. The void has been installed. The tables have been swept clean. Absolutely nothing is left. What do you conclude? I conclude that man is left. And if he has the strength to look his own will in the face and to find it solid we have the right to say that he possesses something. And what, I ask you? Stoicism. Times like these have always produced this severe authority.” This is also Gobineau’s response. This is the stoic individualism in which he takes refuge. Nevertheless, de Gobineau fights up to the bitter end. Even though isolated, even though his efforts are made sterile because of his isolation, he continues to work in the direction of grandiose dream, whose vague and magnificent perspective his imagination of the superman has allowed him to glimpse. Despite it all, he has enough pride to create for himself an ideal he won’t betray, a goal he will pursue. A table of human values, a scale whose summit he will occupy in a sterile but splendid isolation. In a way he recalls the symbols of Leconte de Lisle in his energy, his disdain, and his despair.

The wounded wolf who stays silent so as to die,
And who twists the knife in his bleeding mouth

Nietzsche at a certain time became enamored of an ethnic ideal no less ancient and no less uncertain than the Gobinist ideal. He was enamored of primitive Hellenism, the radiant and prestigious Hellenism of “The Origins of Tragedy,” i.e., the primitive Greek soul, at one and the same time Dionysian and Apollonian. The Greek soul in which the apotheosis of the ardent,

overabundant, joyous, exalted and triumphant life is summarized, as well as the beauty, the purity of line, the nobility of attitude, the majesty of the face and the serenity of the gaze. It is with this magical image that Nietzsche confronts current civilization, with its regulated and domesticated societies, with its tyrannical and servile democracy, with its depressing Christianity, with its narrow-minded morality, which weakens and makes ugly. And he too sounds the alarm issued by de Gobineau: Decadence! Decadence!

In truth, Nietzsche's pessimism, like that of Gobineau, doesn't lack for a secret relationship with romantic pessimism. There is much romanticism in the historical pessimism of Gobineau and Nietzsche. If these two thinkers take refuge in the past it is because the present brings only vulgarity and ugliness, it's that they situate their grandiose dreams of impenitent romantics in a vanished utopia and uchronia. Whatever the case, by virtue of a law whose effects we are following, the pessimism of Nietzsche, like that of Gobineau, turns into individualism. It is true that the nuance in Nietzschean individualism is more difficult to determine than in that of Gobineau's individualism. Gobineau's individualism is a despairing stoicism, an isolation of the defeated man of action, of a haughty thinker taking refuge in an ivory tower, from the heights of which he witnesses the slow agony of a world without either force or beauty.

Nietzsche's individualism is clearly an anti-social individualism. But is that anti-societism absolute or relative, provisional or definitive? Does Nietzsche indict only modern society or all societies? Nietzsche's ideas on this subject is somewhat unclear. "Modern societies," says M. Faguet, "are anti-Nietzschean in their nature, and Nietzsche cannot prevent himself from being, and especially appearing, anti-social. Certainly (and why not recognize this?) he must have had moments of anti-societism and have said to himself: 'It is possible that life as I conceive it was simply savage life and it can only be fully and brilliantly realized in the state of nature or in that primitive state of little organized societies that we sometimes call the state of nature. At heart, it is social invention that is against me.' He could have told himself this, though he didn't write it anywhere, he who wrote everything that he thought with so much bravura and daring. He could have thought this on several occasions and for my part I know him to be too intelligent to doubt that he had this thought. But persuaded, perhaps erroneously, that there was a race – that is the Greeks – that was organized in a society and that created the free, beautiful and strong life, he didn't stop at anti-social thought, leaving to a few of his disciples the task or the pleasure of deducing his premises. What of which he carried out a penetrating, subtle and uncompromising criticism of was modern society." It is difficult to determine the exact place that anti-societism occupies in Nietzschean philosophy and the scope that Nietzsche attributed to it. At certain moments this anti-societism attacks modern society, at others it seems to attack the very conditions of social life. Is Nietzsche's anti-societism radical, as radical as that of Stirner, when Nietzsche violently protests against the conduct and the virtues that every society imposes on its members: the spirit of consistency and a spirit of adaptation and obedience to the rules; when on the contrary he glorifies the faculties and energies stifled by life in society; when along with Stirner he celebrates that happy freedom of the instincts, horror of the rule, love of the fortuitous, the uncertain, the unforeseen? Nietzsche's social philosophy seems here to be an absolute and definitive anti-societism, it seems to summarize the common basis of social pessimism and individualism: the perception of a natural, profound and – in a way – psychological antinomy between the individual and society, the individual having instincts that do not yield before social life, since man is not adapted to social life, which wounds him like a poorly made shoe. Seen in this way

Nietzschean individualism is profoundly anti-social and Strinerite; it is a revolt not only against our society, but against any society, future or possible.

But it is only fair to remark that in certain aspects of his philosophy, which are perhaps not the least important, Nietzsche puts the lie to this rebellious attitude, or at least places it in a secondary position and subordinates it to an ideal of a human grandeur still possible and realizable in the future.

An important difference separates Nietzsche from Gobineau in this regard. It's the concept of the Superman, which is in opposition to the Gobinien law of the necessary limitations on the resources of human aptitude. This law is formulated in the "Discourse on Inequality:" "Man," says de Gobineau, "was able to learn certain things; he has forgotten many others. He has not added a single sense to his senses, a member to his members, a faculty to his soul. He has done nothing but turn to another side of the circle that is his lot." De Gobineau closes humanity into a narrow circle of capacities and works. He assigns him unsurpassable limits within which he can, it is true, regress, but which his physiology forbids him from ever surpassing. From this flows the theory of irremediable decadence once human races are adulterated through mixing, and Gobineau's hopeless pessimism. Opposed to this is the concept of the Superman. While de Gobineau looks on the superior human race as definitively fallen from its original purity and beauty, Nietzsche, he too theoretician of decadence, performs a sudden about face. At a certain moment in the development of his thought, and in what is perhaps an example of inconsistency, he introduces into his philosophy the strange concept of the Superman, that is, of a humanity called on to indefinitely surpass itself, to make itself indefinitely superior to itself, incomparable to itself, incommensurable with itself. Through this unexpected change in front Nietzsche displaces his human ideal. He transports it from the rear to the front, from the past to the future. From historic and retrospective this ideal becomes futuristic. The human ideal is no longer the primitive Hellenism from which we are fallen, it is the Superman of tomorrow. In this way Nietzsche superimposes or rather substitutes for his theory of decadence a theory of indefinite progress. And decadence itself takes on a new meaning. Nietzsche admits that the current decadence is a period of transition from which will come a society containing the possibility of nobility and beauty. He only rejects current society in the hope of finding a society hospitable to great souls, a society where masters will reign and where great things will yet be done. At those moments Nietzsche is not a hopeless pessimist like the Count de Gobineau, nor is he an anti-social individualist, a theoretician of revolt for revolt's sake like Stirner. On the contrary, he is then, or wants to be, a creator of values, the founder of a society, a prophet, a priest.

And so Nietzsche's attitude towards the problem of the relations between the individual and society are not clear. But through its very lack of decisiveness it confirms the psychological law that we are attempting to establish: the correlation between individualism and pessimism. At those moments when Nietzsche is optimistic, when he believes in the Superman, he is not an anti-social individualist. He repudiates Stirnerite individualism as a manifestation of the "slave revolt," as one of the symptoms of our modern decadence. On the other hand, at those times when Nietzsche is pessimistic, at those times when he says that the Greek miracle was unique and we have no chance of reviving it, he shows himself to be an uncompromising enemy of society and hater of social ties. He expresses an anti-societism as radical, as absolute as that of Stirner.

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