

## *Nietzsche theorist of the state?*<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract: What is Nietzsche's place in the history of political thought? This article attempts to situate Nietzsche by contrasting him with two traditions: the social contract, in particular in its Hobbesian variety, which Nietzsche critically engages with in both 'The Greek State' and the Genealogy; and nineteenth century theories of the 'withering away of the state', which serve as an interesting counterpoint to Nietzsche's own view of the 'decay of the state'. In doing so, the article challenges the view that Nietzsche does not offer a theory of the state, and should therefore not be considered a political thinker of any kind.*

It has often been said that if Nietzsche expresses various views about the state, these do not amount to anything systematic enough to be considered a political theory. Brian Leiter, a prominent commentator on Nietzsche, has written that the 'interpretative question' concerning Nietzsche's political philosophy is whether 'scattered remarks and parenthetical outbursts add up to *systematic* views on questions of philosophical significance'. His own view is that Nietzsche 'has no political philosophy, in the conventional sense of a theory of the state and its legitimacy'. If he 'occasionally expresses views about political matters...read in context, they do not add up to a theoretical account of any of the questions of political philosophy'. Leiter explains: 'the canon of political philosophers is composed of thinkers (like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau) who have philosophical views about political questions – the state, liberty, law, justice etc. – not thinkers whose views about *other* topics merely

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Melissa Lane, Thomas Hopkins, the Cambridge Political Thought Seminar and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on this text.

have “implications” for politics’. Instead Nietzsche, for Leiter, is an ‘*esoteric moralist*’, someone who ‘has views about human flourishing, views he wants to communicate at least to a select few’, but for whom the ‘larger world, including its form of political and economic organisation, is simply not his concern’.<sup>2</sup>

By denying Nietzsche a reflexion on politics, Leiter places himself in a long line of interpreters stretching back to the end of World War II. The first, and perhaps still most prominent, was Walter Kaufmann. His seminal *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, first published in 1950 and now in its fourth edition,<sup>3</sup> rescued Nietzsche from the philosophical abyss he had fallen into after his misuse by the Nazis, which at the time had prompted Bertrand Russell to call the war ‘Nietzsche’s war’. Kaufmann reconstructed Nietzsche as a German humanist whose sole preoccupation was with an anti-political culture. But the price he paid for rescuing Nietzsche from the ‘philosophical bestiary’, as Alasdair MacIntyre described the place to which Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* had been consigned,<sup>4</sup> was to deny him any interest in politics.

Kaufmann’s line of argumentation still serves as a cue for many readings of Nietzsche, providing a starting point for authors such as Bernard Williams and Alexander Nehamas, and remains a powerful strand of interpretation today.<sup>5</sup> A number of different authors, including Keith Ansell-Pearson, Daniel Conway, Bruce Detwiler and Don Dombowsky, have more recently questioned such a view, but the position remains firmly entrenched in the secondary literature.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this article is

---

<sup>2</sup> B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (London, 2003), pp. 292-7.

<sup>3</sup> W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, 2013), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 2008) and A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge [MA], 2002).

<sup>6</sup> K. Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1994); D. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London, 1997); B. Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago, 1990); and Don Dombowsky, *Nietzsche’s Machiavellian Politics* (Basingstoke, 2004).

to contribute to this debate by approaching Nietzsche through one of the central themes of the history of political thought, namely that of the state. By adopting this perspective, it wishes to continue to challenge the view that Nietzsche held no interest in politics at all, and in doing so enrich the discussion about how his relation to political thought might best be understood.

An essential part of this approach is to pay particular attention to the context within which Nietzsche's theory of the state emerged, namely a disagreement with Richard Wagner over the role of slavery in the ancient city-state. This will be the focus of the first part of the article. It will also be concerned with the contrast Nietzsche draws of his own account of the origins of the state and that of the social contract tradition, the latter of which he dismisses as a 'fantasy' in *On the Genealogy of Morality*.<sup>7</sup> Yet in a youthful unpublished essay 'The Greek State', Nietzsche is quite clear that the state of nature is a Hobbesian '*bellum omnium contra omnes*'.<sup>8</sup> Unpacking the relationship between these two seemingly competing claims will be the task of the first part of the article.<sup>9</sup>

In the second part I will turn my attention to Nietzsche's theory of the 'decay of the state': a common theme in the history of political thought and, indeed, the nineteenth century. What must be made clear here is that when Nietzsche talks about the state in his work, he is in fact refereeing to three related but at the same time distinct instances, that follow chronologically. First is the ancient city-state, which Nietzsche lauds for providing the original platform for the development of high culture that could not have taken place beforehand. This state subsequently suffers a

---

<sup>7</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* [GM], trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge, 2007), II, #17.

<sup>8</sup> F. Nietzsche, 'The Greek State' [GSt] in *ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> In this article I will focus on Nietzsche's critique of the Hobbesian social contract, rather than on Hobbes himself, as Nietzsche appears more to be attacking a certain position associated with Hobbes' political thought than engaging textually with him. See T. Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* (Campaign, 2008), for Nietzsche's knowledge of Hobbes.

transformation into the modern nationalist *Kulturstaat*, which Nietzsche virulently condemns for its instrumentalisation of culture for its own benefit, thereby inverting the initial mission which saw the birth of the state in the first place. But ultimately Nietzsche diagnoses the end of that state too – its ‘decay’ – and it is in this transition away from the modern nation-state, towards what we might term a post-modern state, that he will locate his political project.

My goal, then, is to argue that Nietzsche *does* offer a systematic political theory of the state, but one that is an *alternative* to the social contract tradition, which he explicitly rejects. In doing so, I intend to challenge those readings of Nietzsche that refuse any sustained or coherent thinking on politics on his behalf. Yet on the basis of his theory of the state’s decay, I will also posit that Nietzsche changes the focus of his interest in politics to a new problem of political philosophy, namely how to reconcile and re-establish normative and political authority in the transition away from the modern nation-state. This shows how Nietzsche is able to adapt his political thinking to his analysis of contemporary society, thus disproving the point that Nietzsche was unconcerned with his political and social context.

It is well known that Nietzsche writes in many different styles – the aphoristic being his most famous – and that, outside perhaps *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Genealogy of Morality*, and *The Antichrist*, his books address many different themes, rather than being a sustained analysis of one particular subject. But this does not mean that he did not deal with political issues, or any philosophical topoi for that matter, in a thorough manner across the range of his writings. Nor does it imply that he did not devote particular essays or chapters to political topics.<sup>10</sup> Whilst my article will focus primarily on Nietzsche’s earlier writings – ‘The Greek State’ (1872), *Schopenhauer*

---

<sup>10</sup> Note that in late 1888 Nietzsche starts to draft a ‘Tractatus Politicus’ in late 1888. See G. Colli and M. Montinari eds., *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* [KSA] (Berlin, 2009) 13: 11[54].

as *Educator* (1874) and the chapter ‘A Glance at the State’ of *Human, all too human* (1878) in particular – by linking these texts to later ones such as *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), I desire to show Nietzsche’s sustained, and indeed quite coherent, interest in the state. I by no means desire to suggest that there are no breaks in the development of Nietzsche’s thought – I am sympathetic to the usual tripartite division of Nietzsche’s works, and Martin Ruehl has convincingly argued, to my mind, that ‘The Greek State’ signals the start of Nietzsche’s departure from his early Wagneriana<sup>11</sup> – but I do want to posit that in terms of his political reflexion, in particular with regards to his view of the state, Nietzsche held quite consistent views throughout his productive life.

Nietzsche, therefore, by theorising three different states across his oeuvre, demonstrates a sustained interest in the topic of the state throughout his corpus. Moreover, that he draws together ‘The Greek State’ and the *Genealogy* on the subject of the birth of the state, and again *Human, all too human* and *Twilight of the Idols* on the matter of the modern’s state decay, suggests that there are in fact strong continuities in his conceptualisation of these three states over the course of his writings.

What drives the research behind this article is the question of identifying Nietzsche’s correct place in the canon of political thought. I aim to do so by positioning Nietzsche in relation to different traditions – the social contract, theories of the ‘decay of the state’ – in the history of political thought conventionally understood: my goal is to say something new about Nietzsche, not make a novel point about these traditions. Nietzsche has now become a staple of many political thought curricula, but the best manner to approach him – and indeed what best set text to use,

---

<sup>11</sup> M. Ruehl, ‘*Politeia* 1871: Young Nietzsche and the Greek State’ in P. Bishop ed., *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition* (Rochester, 2004), pp. 79-97.

although this currently seems to have solidified around the *Genealogy* – is still a matter of contention. Through my work here I hope to begin to offer one fruitful way of doing so.

## **I: Wagner and Slavery**

From the outset Nietzsche considered a political reflexion to be an integral part of his work. One of the working titles of what was to become *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) was ‘Tragedy and Free Spirits: Meditations on the Ethical-Political Significance of the Music Drama’, and a chapter on the state and slavery was consistently planned from 1869 to 1871.<sup>12</sup> In early 1871 Nietzsche penned a long fragment on the theme,<sup>13</sup> and the essay would be reproduced in near-identical form as the third of the ‘Five Prefaces to Five Unwritten Books’ he offered Cosima Wagner for Christmas 1872, entitled ‘The Greek state’. Yet when the *Birth* was published earlier that year, Nietzsche had been reduced to merely ‘noting’ that ‘Alexandrian culture needs a slave-class in order to exist’.<sup>14</sup> The chapter on state and slavery had disappeared.

Martin Ruehl speculates that the chapter was purged at the behest of the ‘Master’, Richard Wagner.<sup>15</sup> Wagner’s influence on Nietzsche is fully recognised, but the impact Wagner’s political thought had on Nietzsche’s own political thinking has been under-explored, and I wish to rectify this here. Indeed, Cosima notes in her diaries that the first oral disagreement between Wagner and Nietzsche concerned the Franco-Prussian War: Nietzsche had expressed – as he would do in a more systematic

---

<sup>12</sup> KSA 7: 5[22, 42 and 43].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7: 10[1].

<sup>14</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* [BT], trans. R. Speirs (Cambridge, 1999) #18.

<sup>15</sup> Ruehl, ‘*Politeia* 1871’, p. 83.

manner in his first *Untimely Meditation* – his anxiety about the threat posed to culture by the new militaristic Prussian state.<sup>16</sup> In response to this Wagner, who had grown increasingly nationalistic, and had moved away from some of the more radical inclinations of his youth,<sup>17</sup> proclaimed that he ‘approves everything: the police, the soldiers, the censored press, the stifling of the parliament’ in view of the Prussian victory and German unification.<sup>18</sup>

In his early essay *The Artwork of the Future* (1849), which Nietzsche had been given to read upon his first visit to Tribschen in 1869, Wagner had argued that Greek culture had crumbled under slavery, and that the true artwork of the future could only come about through the liberation of the modern wage-labouring slave.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, however, disagreed. Drawing from his earlier fragment, Nietzsche writes in ‘The Greek State’ that ‘even if it were true that the Greeks were ruined because they kept slaves, the opposite is even more certain, that we will be destroyed by the *lack* of slavery’.<sup>20</sup> This was the ‘cruel-sounding truth’ he claimed to have identified in the essay, the fact that ‘*slavery belongs to the essence of a culture*’.<sup>21</sup>

These sorts of passages did not sit well with Wagner, and after a visit to Tribschen from the 3-8 April 1871, where an early draft of the *Birth* was discussed with Cosima and Richard Wagner, the socio-political sections were dropped from Nietzsche’s subsequent reworkings of the book.<sup>22</sup> It seems only someone like Wagner would have had a powerful enough influence on Nietzsche for him to change his

---

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Gersdorff, 9 November 1870 in G. Colli and M. Montinari eds., *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe* [KSB] (Berlin, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Introduction to Art and Revolution’ in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. W. A. Ellis (London, 1895) 1: 29. Note, however, that Wagner’s Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* specifically excluded boxes and galleries from the construction of the main auditorium, which only included a uniform *parterre*. As a ‘*Volkfest*’, the festivals at Bayreuth were for the whole *Volk* equally, and in equality. The reality of the ensuing exorbitant prices put paid to this original plan.

<sup>18</sup> As noted in Cosima’s diary, quoted from *KSA* 15 Basle, 21 October-23 December 1870.

<sup>19</sup> Wagner, ‘The Artwork of the Future’, in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, I, pp. 184, 69.

<sup>20</sup> *GSt*, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

<sup>22</sup> Ruehl, ‘*Politeia* 1871’, p. 83.

writings, and Nietzsche's laudatory remarks about him in the conclusion to the *Birth* are well known. Yet what this episode shows is that just as Wagner's mission to create a 'total artwork' required a 'total revolution' of both culture and politics, Nietzsche's project contained from the beginning an essential socio-political element, which asserted the role of slavery in the creation of high culture but which was perhaps, however, suppressed out of deference to Wagner. The political element was to be found in the essay on 'The Greek State', which represents Nietzsche's first systematisation of his early political views. That Nietzsche maintained his views on slavery, as expressed in his early draft for the *Birth*, is demonstrated by the fact that he offered an almost exact copy of the passage in question – 'The Greek State' – to Cosima less than a year after the publication of the *Birth* – a poisoned gift if there ever was one.

In 'The Greek state' Nietzsche also takes issue with Wagner's *On State and Religion* – another manuscript Nietzsche read whilst in Tribschen – which the latter had recently composed at the behest of King Ludwig II of Bavaria.<sup>23</sup> There Wagner accounts for the emergence of the state as from a Hobbesian 'fear of violence', which leads to a 'contract whereby the units seek to save themselves from mutual violence, through a little practice of restraint'.<sup>24</sup> Whilst Nietzsche concurred that the state of nature was one of '*bellum omnium contra omnes*',<sup>25</sup> he disagreed with the idea that the state arose through a contract. Instead he saw the state as originating from a

---

<sup>23</sup> The text was penned in 1864, when Wagner was summoned to the intimate companionship of the King, but only published 9 years later, in 1873. Besides the disagreement over the origins of the state, Nietzsche seemed quite taken by the piece, writing to Gustav Krug on the 4 August of that year that 'never has one spoken to a King with such beauty and profundity'.

<sup>24</sup> Wagner, 'On State and Religion', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, IV, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> *GSt*, p. 170.



‘conqueror with the iron hand’, who ‘suddenly, violently and bloodily’ takes control of a yet unformed population and forces it into a hierarchical society.<sup>26</sup>

Nietzsche’s rejection of the social contract goes hand-in-hand with his affirmation of slavery: the contract would presuppose equality between pledgers and thus repudiate the slavery upon which Greek culture had come about, and which would again be needed, as Wagner denied, for true culture to be recreated. Indeed, Wagner posited the social contract as a means of freeing the modern wage-labouring slave and reconciling the warring classes within the bosom of the nation under the guidance of an enlightened and Christian king (read Ludwig II).<sup>27</sup> This rejection of equality also sheds light on a common present-day rejection of Nietzsche as a political philosopher: as Nietzsche does not share the ‘egalitarian premise’ of contemporary political philosophy,<sup>28</sup> he is therefore excluded from its ranks, notwithstanding Nietzsche’s own understanding of what politics might be. Whilst Nietzsche’s engagement with the social contract tradition emanates from a disagreement with Wagner concerning slavery, it also allowed him to build his own theory of the birth of the state and its justification, to which we now turn.

## **II: The Greek State**

By referring to Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau in his discussion of what a political philosophy ought to be, Leiter appears to have in mind the social contract tradition when he defines political philosophy in the ‘conventional sense of a theory of the state and its legitimacy’. So at least one aspect of having a political philosophy on Leiter’s

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.

<sup>27</sup> Wagner, ‘On State and Religion’, in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, IV, pp. 11-15.

<sup>28</sup> Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, p. 290.

terms – for the sake of this article I leave aside the question of having philosophical views about liberty, law, justice etc., although Nietzsche clearly has a lot to say about those too – is to have a philosophy of the state that takes the form of social contract theory. The publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, with its ‘original position’ and ‘veil of ignorance’ which can be conceived of as being analogous to the ‘state of nature’, has prompted a revival of the social contract tradition in the late twentieth century. But it is unfair to demand that all political philosophy, and in particular Nietzsche’s political philosophy, be judged on whether it meets this criterion, which in reality was challenged as early as the notion of the social contract itself.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, much of what is important in political philosophy is the manner in which various thinkers have redefined the field. Hobbes notoriously did so by theorising the modern state, a concept unknown to the ancients. We should therefore be more attentive to the terms within which Nietzsche frames his contribution to political philosophy. Otherwise to dismiss him as a political thinker because he does not match a certain predetermined criterion not only conveniently sidelines him from the field, but moreover misses his actual original contribution to it.

Leiter himself gets caught up in this problem. Although he criticises Martha Nussbaum in his work for requiring that ‘serious political thought’ address seven precise topics that would exclude Marx from the political philosophy canon – he writes that the ‘serious political thought’ Nussbaum has in mind is in fact “‘serious” academic *liberal* political theory’ that ‘did not exist before the rise of a large class of bourgeois academics after World War II’<sup>30</sup> – nonetheless he too re-imposes on

---

<sup>29</sup> D. Hume, “Of the original contract”, in *Political Essays* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 186-201.

<sup>30</sup> Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, p. 293 n. 8. Again, we can note that Nietzsche has in fact quite a lot to say to the seven topics – ‘understanding of material need; procedural justification; liberty and its worth; racial, ethnic and religious difference; gender and family; justice between nations; and moral psychology’ – some we can even identify over the course of this article, but they are not, as Nussbaum correctly identified, in the liberal vein.

Nietzsche a modern understanding of political philosophy – the social contract – that would exclude someone like Plato, for whom the question of the (modern) state and its legitimacy had no meaning.<sup>31</sup>

In ‘The Greek State’ Nietzsche concurred with the Hobbesian view of the state of nature being a *‘bellum omnium contra omnes’*. But he did not account for its birth in a contract. Instead, as we just saw, he located the birth of the ‘cruel tool’ of the state in the iron ‘conquerors’. Indeed, these conquerors are themselves, on Nietzsche’s account, the state. Yet the ‘ignominious’ birth of the state is justified as a means to genius and culture. ‘Nature’ – we see the influence of Romanticism on Nietzsche’s early thought here – had instilled in the conqueror the state-creating instinct so that she might achieve ‘her salvation in appearance in the mirror of genius’.<sup>32</sup> The ‘dreadful’ birth of the state, whose monuments include ‘devastated lands, ruined towns, savage men, consuming hatred of nations’ is justified by nature because it serves as a means to genius. ‘The state appears before it proudly and calmly: leading the magnificently blossoming woman, Greek society, by the hand’.<sup>33</sup>

Whilst Nietzsche’s genealogy of the state claims to be more realistic than the ‘fanciful’, in his own words, account of the social contract tradition, this does not imply that on his account the state cannot be justified. Of course there is a difference between normative and descriptive claims here: Hobbes, and indeed Rousseau, gave over the course of their writings quite detailed accounts of the history of the state they understood to be at odds with the normative ideals they were recommending, and the social contract theorists are often thought of as having tailored their state of nature to

---

<sup>31</sup> Q. Skinner, ‘The State’ in T. Ball et al eds., *Political innovation and conceptual change* (Cambridge, 1989) pp. 90-131.

<sup>32</sup> For the Hegelian overtones of this process – Conway describes it as a ‘cunning of nature’ – see D. Conway, ‘The Birth of the State’ in H. Siemens and V. Roodt eds., *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche’s Legacy for Political Thought* (Berlin, 2008) pp. 37-67. See further in the same collection L. Hatab, ‘Breaking the Social Contract’, pp. 169-188.

<sup>33</sup> *GS*, p. 169.

justify the type of state they were advocating.<sup>34</sup> But Nietzsche is here rejecting both their descriptive – how the state came into being – and normative claims – how the birth of the state can be justified.

The state, for Nietzsche, is justified because it opens up a space within which culture, through genius, can for the first time flourish.<sup>35</sup> There are a number of elements to this claim. First, that the time and energy used to defend oneself in the ‘war of all against all’ is redirected, within a pacified society, towards more artistic and cultural pursuits. Nietzsche explains that once states have been founded everywhere, the bellicose urge gets concentrated into ‘less frequent’ but altogether much stronger ‘bolts of thunder and flashes of lightning’ of ‘dreadful clouds of war between nations’. Thus, much as it was for Hobbes, the ‘state of nature’ gets transferred to the inter-state level. In the meantime, however, the ‘concentrated effect of that *bellum*, turned inwards, gives society time to germinate and turn green everywhere, so that it can let radiant blossoms of genius sprout forth as soon as warmer days come’. In other words, the energy that was used to simply stay alive in the individual war of all against all gets redirected, once encased in and protected by the new state, either collectively towards wars against other nations or, in the intermediary, towards satisfying a ‘new world of necessities’, namely culture.<sup>36</sup>

The two interrelated justifications for the state – genius and culture – come together in the figure of the first genius, namely the military genius. Since the ‘beasts of prey’ were organised on a ‘war-footing’, the first type of state, even the ‘*archetype*’ of the state, is the military state, and the first genius a military genius. The first work

---

<sup>34</sup> See K. Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche contra Rousseau: A study of Nietzsche’s moral and political thought* (Cambridge, 1996) on this point.

<sup>35</sup> Culture predates the state in both Locke and Rousseau’s account. It is debatable whether it also exists in ‘war of all against all’ – there is space for jealousy – but it certainly was not the aim of Hobbes’ state to encourage high culture in the way Nietzsche would have wanted it, and definitely not on the basis of a slave class.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

of art is the state itself and its constitution – Nietzsche mentions the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus – a thought borrowed from Burckhardt.<sup>37</sup> As a military state, the first state therefore divides itself into hierarchical military castes and this ‘war-like society’ necessarily takes the form of a pyramidal structure with a large slave-class bottom stratum.<sup>38</sup>

Nietzsche explains how the slave comes about: as the ‘beasts of prey’ are conquerors, they exercise what Nietzsche labels the ‘first *right*’: the right of power. All rights are fundamentally ‘presumption, usurpation and violence’ – a notion again taken from Burckhardt. Consequently, as the Greeks saw, the defeated ‘belong to the victor, together with his wife and child, goods and blood’: the masses who are formed into society become the slaves of the ‘beasts of prey’ because they have been conquered.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, although they are conquered, their existence also becomes justified. As they form the flesh of the state, their slavery is justified as a means to the production of the genius. For Nietzsche true dignity is ‘*being acknowledged as worthy to be a means for genius*’.<sup>40</sup>

The slaves justify their existence as a means to genius by liberating the latter from having to physically work for their subsistence through taking on their share of the burden. This is the meaning of the cruel ‘truth-claim’ that Nietzsche makes in ‘The Greek State’, that ‘*slavery belongs to the essence of a culture*’:

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, *beyond* the measure that is necessary for the individual. At their expense, through their extra work, that privileged class is

---

<sup>37</sup> ‘The State as a Work of Art’ in J. Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (London, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> *GS*, p. 172.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172.

to be removed from the struggle for existence, in order to produce and satisfy a new world of necessities.<sup>41</sup>

The extra work of the slaves liberates the artistic class from labouring for life's necessities, so that they may dedicate themselves entirely to producing great works of art that justify the existence of the state, society, slaves and themselves as a whole. It is only a few exceptional beings – geniuses – who can produce art, the 'small number of Olympian men' who produce the 'world of art' by being placed on top of the 'misery of men living a life of toil'.<sup>42</sup> In sum: slavery is a requisite for the existence of geniuses, who themselves are the only ones capable of producing high culture.

This account of the birth and justification of the state in 'The Greek State' finds a distinct echo in the description of the state Nietzsche offers in second essay of the *Genealogy*. In the infamous passage on the notorious 'blond beasts of prey', themselves perhaps 'conquerors with an iron fist', Nietzsche writes:

I used the word 'state': it is obvious who is meant by this – some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race, which, organised on a war footing, and with the power to organise, unscrupulously lays its dreadful paws on the populace which, though it might be vastly greater in number, is still shapeless and shifting. In this way, the 'state' began on earth: I think I have dispensed with the fantasy which has it begin with a 'contract'.<sup>43</sup>

So for Nietzsche the 'blond beasts of prey' are themselves the state, much as were the 'iron conquerors': once they have conquered and enslaved a people they become the 'repressive and ruthless machinery' that shape the people into society. Later in the

---

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> *GM*, II, #17.

same section he explains that ‘they arrive like fate’, that ‘their work is an instinctive creation of forms...They are the most involuntary and unconscious artists in existence. In them that terrible egoism of the artist is in control, which stares out like bronze and sees himself, in his work, eternally justified, just like a mother is in her child’.

Both ‘The Greek State’ and the *Genealogy* therefore present the same account of the birth and justification of the state, as a conquering horde who, organised on a war-footing, suddenly appear to have established a hierarchical state which is their work of art, only justifiable as a whole, and within which the slaves’ repressed instincts are turned inwards. As ‘The Greek State’ was never published, Nietzsche thereby gives a public endorsement to his earlier views on the state, and thus both texts should be read side-by-side. Moreover, that Nietzsche should reiterate 15 years later exactly the same theory of the birth of the state suggests very strong continuities between at least Nietzsche’s earlier and later periods, conventionally understood, in terms of his view of the ancient state.

We can now see Nietzsche’s specific engagement with the social contract tradition, which the *Genealogy* reinforces and again makes explicit, in particular his criticism of the Hobbesian position. The main point is that whilst Nietzsche does share in positing a primordial ‘war of all against all’ – and that, like Hobbes, this state of nature persists between constituted states – he rejects the notion that the state came about through a contract. Whereas the contractarians believe that the state arose, or should arise, from a contract between all members, Nietzsche views the state as a pack of ‘blond beasts of prey’ – and not some ‘Leviathan’ – who form into society the

shapeless masses.<sup>44</sup> For Nietzsche the state ‘begins with an act of violence’, whereas the Hobbesian social contract was thought up precisely to get away from this primal hostility, and for Locke and Rousseau the state of nature was not essentially violent in the first place.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, we might add that there is a strong methodological difference here: whilst Hobbes clearly wanted to make a political intervention in his time, he nonetheless offers us an abstract and legalistic contract, whereas Nietzsche provides us with a genealogical account of the rise and transformation of the state, which he only attempts to define in its different historical contexts (‘only that which has not history can be defined’).<sup>46</sup>

The fact that for Nietzsche a large slave-class is created in the process also goes directly against the tradition, for which a contract was meant to guarantee some degree of freedom for everyone, and not just to the conquering few as in Nietzsche’s account. Finally, nature’s intent in creating the state was, according to Nietzsche, to provide a means to genius and culture, in contrast to the social contract which was meant to allow people to live in harmony. These justify the state’s advent. But if the state is justified as a means to genius, Nietzsche takes this thought further and applies it to all aspects of life. The slaves who make up the society that the ‘beasts of prey’ have formed also become justified as means to genius and culture because it is through their extra work that the geniuses are liberated from life’s ‘necessities’ and can thereby pursue their artistic task. Not only the state but also mankind is justified as a means to genius. This gives a particular flavour to the famous line from the *Birth* that it is both ‘existence’ and the ‘world’ that are ‘eternally justified’.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> The analogy with Hobbes’ ‘commonwealth by institution’ does not hold either, as for Hobbes this still involves a contract.

<sup>45</sup> Pace Hume, utility or need does not play a role here either, rather some sort of historical necessity.

<sup>46</sup> *GM*, II, #13.

<sup>47</sup> *BT*, #5. See also *GM*, II, # 17: “”meaning” with regards to the whole”.



Nietzsche can be considered to offer a ‘political philosophy’ as Leiter would have wanted it: he has a ‘theory of the state’, which finds its origin in the ‘blond beasts of prey’, and a ‘justification’ for it in being a means to genius and culture. It is, however, an *alternative* political philosophy to the social contract tradition.

### III: The Decay of the Modern State

Nietzsche had placed his reflexion of the Greek state under the guise of ‘*Plato’s perfect state*’, namely *The Republic*.<sup>48</sup> There he presents Plato as being the first to have discovered ‘through poetic intuition’ the ‘actual aim of the [Greek] state’, which was the ‘constantly renewed creation and preparation of the genius, compared with whom everything else is just a tool, aid and facilitator’. In the Platonic state we recognise the ‘wonderful grand hieroglyph of a profound *secret study of the connection between state and genius*’, which Nietzsche believes is in ‘eternal need to be interpreted’.<sup>49</sup> So Plato is important for Nietzsche not because he offers a definition of the state as such, but because he is the first to perceive what the Ancient Greek state is truly about, namely the creation of genius.

Reinterpreting this secret connection is precisely what Nietzsche sets out to do in his third *Untimely Meditation, Schopenhauer as Educator*. There he posits his dictum that “mankind must work continually at the production of individual great men – that and nothing else is its task”.<sup>50</sup> This was, of course, the mission nature had ascribed to the state and its slave class. But in contrast to the Greek state, where both

---

<sup>48</sup> In German Plato’s *Republic* is translated *Der Staat*.

<sup>49</sup> *GSt*, p. 173.

<sup>50</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* [SE] in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1997) #6.

the conquerors and slaves were simply the unconscious tools of nature – the ‘state-creating instinct’ for the former<sup>51</sup> – in the modern world mankind can arrive at a ‘conscious awareness of its goal’, namely to ‘seek out and create the favourable conditions under which those great redemptive men can come into existence’.<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche will describe this mission *Platonically*, as having to institute *Plato’s perfect state*, where the creation of the genius is the conscious aim of the state: ‘the promotion of philosophy as the state understands it will one day have to be inspected to see whether the state understands it *Platonically*, which is to say as seriously and honestly as though its highest objective were to produce new Platos’.<sup>53</sup>

This modern Platonic state in many ways represents *Nietzsche’s perfect state*. It is a state where the conscious goal of its organisation is to produce genius and culture. It should be emphasised that this agreement with Plato is a *political* agreement about how society should be structured, and not a *philosophical* agreement: Nietzsche rejects Plato’s ‘Good in itself’ as philosophy’s biggest error.<sup>54</sup> The political consequence of this philosophical disagreement lies in the type of genius that should be created: Nietzsche criticises Plato for excluding the ‘artistic genius’ from the state (although he blames that on Socrates’ influence), allowing only for the ‘genius of wisdom and knowledge’ (the ‘Philosopher-Kings’), whereas the genius in all his manifestations should be promoted.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> *GSt*, p. 168.

<sup>52</sup> *SE*, #6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, #8.

<sup>54</sup> F. Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* [BGE], trans. J. Norman (Cambridge, 2001) ‘Preface’.

<sup>55</sup> *GST*, p. 168. For the parallels between Nietzsche and Plato see T. Brobjer, ‘Nietzsche’s wrestling with Plato and Platonism’ in Paul Bishop ed., *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition* (Rochester, 2004) pp. 241-259; L. Lampert, ‘Nietzsche and Plato’ in *ibid*, pp. 205-219 and C. Zuker, ‘Nietzsche’s Rereading of Plato’ in *Political Theory* 13, No. 2, 1985, pp. 213-238. Whilst the relation between Nietzsche and Plato’s philosophy has been explored, the affinities between their respective political projects less so, as I can only gesture to briefly here.

The Greek state was not to last. Whilst nature had instilled in the ‘beasts of prey’ the ‘state instinct’, these instincts would eventually wane such that ‘men placed by birth...outside the instinct for nation and state’ would arise and come to ‘recognise the state only to the extent...[that it] be in their own interests’. These men gain great power over the state because they break away from the ‘unconscious intention of the state’ that holds sway over the conquerors, and through them the masses under their control, making them thereby ‘means for the state purpose’. Instead, they come to see the state consciously for what it is, namely a huge war-machine, and, rejecting the role nature had assigned to the state and themselves – of being means to genius – they selfishly start to view the state as a means for their own purposes. Nietzsche explains: ‘all other citizens are in the dark about what nature intends for them with their state instinct, and follow blindly; only those who stand outside this know what *they* want from the state, and what the state ought to grant them’. From this, these ‘truly international, homeless, financial recluses’ learn to ‘misuse politics as an instrument of the stock exchange, and state and society as an apparatus for their own enrichment’.<sup>56</sup>

This rising self-awareness and instrumentalisation of the state signals the death of the ancient state and the birth of the modern one. The modern state would not, however, fulfil the Platonic mission Nietzsche had ascribed to it. The modern *Kulturstaat* – meaning the state’s novel and direct involvement in the promotion of cultural and education, notably through taking on the role of mass education through its public schools – is only interested in ‘setting free the spiritual forces of a generation just so far as they may be of use to existing institutions’, as Nietzsche outlines in *Schopenhauer as Educator*. ‘However loudly the state may proclaim its

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170. We can note Nietzsche’s early – still under Wagner’s influence – anti-Semitism in this passage, although he would later come to describe himself as ‘anti-anti-Semitic’.

services to cultures, it furthers culture in order to further itself'.<sup>57</sup> In much the same way as the financial recluses instrumentalise the state for their own personal enrichment, the modern state applies the same logic to culture and instrumentalises it only in order to enhance itself. This must also be understood in the context of rising nationalism, where the state instrumentalised culture as a means of furthering its own national aggrandisement. As such, the mission to produce new Platos is replaced by a complex system of reward and coercion that ensures philosophy and philosophers remain subservient to the state. 'Nothing stands so much in the way of the production and propagation of the great philosopher by nature as does the bad philosopher who works for the state', Nietzsche decries, concluding with the damning accusation that the epitaph of university philosophy will read "it disturbed nobody".<sup>58</sup>

If the Greek state was not to last, nor would the modern one. In an important aphorism of *Human, all too human*, entitled 'Religion and government', he writes that 'a later generation will also see the state shrink to insignificance in various parts of the earth'. The reason for this is that 'modern democracy is the historical form of the *decay of the state*'.<sup>59</sup>

Nietzsche explains: 'the interests of tutelary government and the interests of religion go hand in hand together, so that when the latter begins to die out the foundations of the state are also undermined'.<sup>60</sup> The 'belief in a divine order in the realm of politics' is of 'religious origin' – the Greek state had itself arisen through some form of 'magic'<sup>61</sup> – so if religion disappears then 'the state will unavoidably

---

<sup>57</sup> *SE*, #6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, #8. Cf. F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* [TI] trans. J. Norman (Cambridge, 2007) 'Germans', #4. In his 1872 lectures 'The Future of our Educational Institutions', from which much of this material is drawn, Nietzsche explains that in view of the fact that it describes the modern state as the end-point of history, Hegelianism is the philosophy the state appropriates for itself.

<sup>59</sup> *HH*, #472.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> *GSt*, p. 168.

lose its ancient Isis veil and cease to excite reverence'.<sup>62</sup> This is what happens when a 'quite different conception of government', namely democracy, begins to prevail, such that government is no longer understood as an 'Above in relation to a Below', but merely the 'instrument of the popular will'. The result is that in the democratic conception of government, religion must simply follow the desires of the people, be another one of its 'organs', rather than the prerogative of the priestly class. As religion can no longer provide the support to the state that it once did, the previously reinforcing relationship between the government and the priests also breaks down, to be replaced by nationalism and the instrumentalisation of culture.<sup>63</sup> As such, 'the sovereignty of the people serves to banish the last remnant of magic and superstition' from the state.<sup>64</sup>

In this new cold light the 'individual will see only that side of [the state] that promises to be useful or threatens to be harmful to him' – the instrumentalisation theme is here continued – and so will 'bend all his efforts to acquiring influence upon it'. But this competition will quickly become too great, and will result in the fragmentation of the political community. 'Men and parties' will alternate too quickly, hurling 'one another too fiercely down from the hill after barely having attained the top'. 'No one will feel towards the law any greater obligation than that of bowing for the moment to the force that backs up the law', whilst one will set out at once to 'subvert it with a new force, the creation of a new majority'.<sup>65</sup>

Nietzsche concludes by proclaiming 'with certainty' that 'distrust of all government' will result from the 'uselessness and destructiveness of these short-winded struggles', and will 'impel men to a quite novel resolve: the resolve to do

---

<sup>62</sup> *HH*, #472.

<sup>63</sup> See on this point F. Cameron and D. Dombowsky eds., *Political Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> *HH*, #472.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

away with the concept of the state, to abolish the distinction between public and private'. Instead, an 'invention more suited to their purpose than the state was will gain victory over the state'. 'Private companies' (*Privatgesellschaften*), will 'step by step absorb the business of the state', including those activities which are the 'most resistant remainder of what was formerly the work of the government', namely that of protecting 'the private person from the private person'.<sup>66</sup>

Nietzsche seems rather unperturbed by this future development, and, putting it into a historical perspective, asks 'how many an organising power has mankind not seen die out?', mentioning the 'racial clan', which was far mightier than the 'family' and even 'ruled and regulated long before the family existed'. In reality Nietzsche seems quietly optimistic about these future prospects. For one, "the prudence and self-interests of men" are the qualities that are best developed by this process of attempting to control the state, such that 'if the state is no longer equal to the demands of these forces then the last thing that will ensue is chaos'. However, he is not so bold as to recommend actively working for the dissolution of the state: to do so would require having a 'very presumptuous idea of one's own intelligence and scarcely half an understanding of history'. Instead, he recommends that we place our trust in the "prudence and self-interest of men" who can 'preserve the existence of the state for some time yet' and successfully steer humanity towards a more suitable invention. But ultimately Nietzsche contends that once the historical mission of the democratic conception of the state is accomplished, 'a new page will be turned in the storybook of humanity in which there will be many strange tales to read and perhaps some of them good ones'.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

*Human, all too human* belongs to Nietzsche's so-called 'middle' or critical period – conventionally seen to stretch from *Human, all too human* to the fourth book of *The Gay Science*<sup>68</sup> – where it is often asked whether Nietzsche is in fact expressing his own views, or whether he is adopting that of an impartial, and experimental, spectator. Whilst in certain contexts I am sympathetic to these claims, in terms of Nietzsche's views of the state there is good reason to believe that those he expresses in this period are genuinely his. The most telling is that he explicitly quotes this section from *Human, all too human* in *Twilight of the Idols*, one of his last texts: 'in *Human, all too human* (I, 472) I already characterised modern democracy (together with its hybrid forms like the "Reich") as the *state's form of decline*'.<sup>69</sup> Moreover he also noted down the concept a number of times in his unpublished fragments between 1883 and 1885.<sup>70</sup> For me, the repeated insistence on this notion on Nietzsche's behalf gives it an air of finality concerning his verdict on the modern state, and suggests in this context, much as it was with his views of the ancient state as he developed across 'The Greek State' and the *Genealogy*, a strong continuity between his earlier and later views on the matter of the modern state and its decay.

#### **IV: Beyond the Modern State**

Basing herself on the *Human, all too human* passage just discussed, Tamsin Shaw has recently argued that the reason Nietzsche does not articulate a 'positive, normative political theory' is because he is a political sceptic. For her, Nietzsche's 'guiding political vision' is 'oriented around the rise of the modern state, which requires

---

<sup>68</sup> R. Abbey, *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> *TI*, "Skirmishes", #39.

<sup>70</sup> *KSA* 10: 9[29], *KSA* 11: 26[434] and 34[146].

normative consensus in order to rule, and a simultaneous process of secularisation that seems to make uncoerced consensus impossible'. In secular times the increased diversity of viewpoints results in the impossibility of locating and recognising normative authority. Whilst the state has the 'ideological capacity' to manufacture a normative consensus, notably through arrogating to itself the instruments of education and culture as we saw above, this consensus cannot hold in the long run: the state cannot rule through direct coercion alone, it needs to be perceived as "legitimate". Nietzsche is thus a political sceptic, according to Shaw, because he cannot see how in the modern world we can 'reconcile our need for normative authority with our need for political authority'.<sup>71</sup>

Shaw is absolutely correct in stating that for Nietzsche the modern state can no longer claim, in a secularised world, the normative authority religion once afforded it, and that consequently its political authority is undermined. However, the passage in question should not lead us to conclude that Nietzsche is a political sceptic, in the sense that he cannot see how we can 'reconcile our need for normative authority with our need for political authority'. Simply put, Nietzsche does believe these two authorities can be married again, but that this will happen outside of the modern state-structure which, as I have emphasised above, is in decline and in the process of being replaced by more 'innovative' and better-suited institutions.

Shaw downplays this latter point, writing that 'although Nietzsche speculates, in passing, about what a world without states would be like, he accepts that political agency in the modern world is concentrated in them', noting that 'in HH 472 he speculates that in the absence of religion the state as a form of political organisation might die out. He warns against any rash political experiments that would hasten this

---

<sup>71</sup> T. Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* (Princeton, 2010), pp. 2-11.



process'.<sup>72</sup> But the decay of the state is not something Nietzsche speculates about 'in passing': it is the essential point of the aphorism. With the rise of modern democracy the state will inevitably decay. If he recommends that we put our faith in "the prudence and self-interest of men" to 'preserve the existence of the state from some time yet', this is to ensure that the process does not descend into chaos and that the heightened senses of the prudential men this evolution produces are fully able to create better-suited and more innovative institutions. He is in no way suggesting that the process of the dissolution of the state be halted, or that we return to a *status quo ante*, where the state was in league with the priestly class. Rather he is looking forward to reading the 'strange tales' that will appear in the 'storybook of humanity' once the modern state has disappeared, hoping that there will be some 'good ones'.<sup>73</sup>

There is no reason to believe that political agency must solely be located in the modern state, and Nietzsche does not hold such a view. Instead, he locates his political project in the transition away from the nation-state. Indeed, the decay of the state signals the superseding of the modern question of political philosophy as framed by Leiter, namely that of the 'theory of the state and its legitimacy'. The new question for Nietzsche will revolve around determining which institutions can fulfil the Platonic mission of producing new Platons the 'Culture-State' failed to achieve.

It is in extra-state institutions that Nietzsche believes this mission can be accomplished, and that a degree of normative authority can be re-established within them. Signalling his move to a standpoint outside of the modern state structure in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche proposes that a 'higher tribunal' should be created outside the universities, devoid of official authority, and without salaries or honours, whose 'function would be to supervise and judge these institutions in regard

---

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> *HH*, #472.

to the education they are promoting'.<sup>74</sup> In this way philosophy can regain its independence, and would be able to ensure that philosophy is taught at the universities with its true aim restored: to produce philosophical geniuses.

For those of the 'smaller band' who will follow this path to true culture, Nietzsche explains that the institution they require would have 'quite a different purpose to fulfil'. It would have to be a 'firm organisation' that prevents them from 'being washed away and dispersed by the tremendous crowd'; to 'die from premature exhaustion or even become alienated from their great task'. This is to enable the completion of their task – preparing 'within themselves and around them for the birth of the genius and the ripening of his work' – through their 'continual purification and mutual support', and their 'sense of staying together'.<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche insists that

one thing above all is certain: these new duties are not the duties of a solitary; on the contrary, they set one in the midst of a mighty community held together, not by external forms and regulations, but by a fundamental idea. It is the fundamental idea of *culture*.<sup>76</sup>

His insistence on the community – instead of the individual – in carrying out the mission of culture seriously challenges the view put forward by Kaufmann, Leiter and Williams amongst others that Nietzsche's writings are destined solely for the solitary thinker cut off from the rest of the world.

This 'new institution' that will defend culture is the intellectual counterpart to the 'private companies' that will slowly start taking over the role of the state. Here we see Nietzsche adapting his continued goal of producing genius and high culture – new Platos – to his analysis of the decline of the modern state, thereby demonstrating his

---

<sup>74</sup> *SE*, #8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, #6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, #5.

grasp, contra Leiter, of the socio-political context of the time, and his ability to draw out the consequences of this understanding for his cultural ideal. It is to this group that Nietzsche will ascribe the ‘expert normative authority’ Shaw doubts can appear. The question of how to combine expert normative authority with political authority remains unresolved for now, but I have argued elsewhere that the best way to think about this is through Nietzsche’s reconceptualisation of the notion of ‘Great politics’, in particular his call in his last writings and notes for the foundation of a ‘Party of life’, which will fight a ‘war of spirits’ against its opposing ‘Party of Christianity’ to establish a sufficient space within a democratic society for those who are called to this path of culture to pursue their mission.

In this article I have endeavoured to bring to the fore the – to my mind – underexplored influence Wagner had on Nietzsche’s political thinking, and that issue arises again here. Whilst previously I underlined how Nietzsche diverged from Wagner’s account of slavery in ancient Greece, the impact Wagner’s own account of the decay of the modern state had on Nietzsche’s thinking on the matter is patent. Returning to *The Artwork of the Future*, one of Wagner’s earlier writings and thus permeated by his then more anarchistic leanings, Wagner had opposed the modern state, which he saw as a ‘most unnatural unions of fellow men’, called into existence by mere ‘external caprice, e.g. dynastic interests’ that yoked together a certain number of men ‘*once and for all*’. Against this, he proposed a vision of a more fluid society in which people would come together in ‘special unions’ to carry out certain projects – unions to be disbanded once the task completed. These unions will ‘ever shape themselves anew, proclaim more complex and vivacious change, the more do they proceed from higher, universal, spiritual needs’. The only lasting union that Wagner envisages is of the ‘material sort’, rooted in the ‘common ground and soil’, that arise

to satisfy the needs that all men have in common, the sum total of which represents ‘the great association of *all* Mankind’. The driving force behind these ‘special unions’ for Wagner is the ‘*Volkish Want*’.<sup>77</sup>

In his ‘Religion and government’ passage from *Human, all too human*, Nietzsche, also rejecting the modern state, transforms this ‘*Volkish Want*’ into a democratic will, which sounds the death-knell of the modern state, and Wagner’s notion of ‘special unions’, grounded in both material and spiritual needs, is recast as the ‘private companies’ which will take over the work of the state. Perhaps of most interest is that Wagner gives an image of how the cultural version of his special unions are to be organised, and from this we can infer how Nietzsche’s own spiritual ‘new institutions’ might work. The key is understanding the relationship the ‘*Darsteller*’ entertains with the ‘fellowship of all the artists’ (note again the communal aspect to the enterprise): all the ‘lonely one’ can do is ‘prefigure [the artwork of the future] to himself’, but it will remain an ‘idle fancy’ if it is not brought to life by the fellowship, the only entity to be able to do so through a common striving.<sup>78</sup> Once the *Darsteller* is invested with an idea, he raises himself to the position of poet, or the ‘artistic legislator’, by convincing the other free members of the fellowship of his idea and thereby takes on its ‘dictatorship’ until the completion of the project. Wagner emphasises that once the project is completed, the poet-dictator – a position open to anyone in the congregation – must return to the fold of the fellowship: the function of the lawgiver is always ‘*periodic*’, and his rule can never be extended to ‘*all occasions*’.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Wagner, ‘The Artwork of the Future’, pp. 203-10.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 201-2.

## Conclusion

Wagner allows us to put into place the final piece of the jigsaw that is Nietzsche's theory of the birth and decay of the state. I think the correct way of conceptualising this transition is not to see it as the death of the state *tout court*, but rather as it going through a number of different transformations – or revaluations, to use a more Nietzschean term – from ancient state where its role was to serve as a means to culture, to the modern nation-state which appropriated culture for its own sake, to finally a much more decentralised, minimalist, regulatory, post-national one. The key here is to keep in mind that Nietzsche differentiates the state from that which he calls the 'business of the state', namely the work of government, which for him includes 'protecting the private person from the private person', and this will be taken up by private contractors.<sup>80</sup> This new entity will retain a relationship to the coercion that gave birth to it, although certainly in a less direct, more regulatory, way. With Wagner we can also see that it will have a European or indeed world-wide scope – 'the great association of *all* Mankind', which chimes well with Nietzsche's notion of the 'Good European' and his rejection of the *nationalist* modern state<sup>81</sup> – but it will still be rooted in the need for material cooperation, allowing for a freer play of different institutions within this framework. In sum: Nietzsche's post-modern state will take the form of a European-wide decentralised and regulatory state, within which different institutions will be allowed freer rein to pursue their respective activities, some – the 'private companies', probably the vast majority – for private gain within a broader

---

<sup>80</sup> Needless to say, the contrast here with Weber is intriguing.

<sup>81</sup> *BGE*, #254

economic and material framework, while others – the ‘new institutions’, a select few – their cultural goals.<sup>82</sup>

Nietzsche was not the only one to prophesise the state’s decay in the second half of the nineteenth century. But the originality of his theory is twofold. First, his idea of the decay of the state is linked to his later, more infamous, statement about the ‘death of God’:<sup>83</sup> once the religious foundation of the state called into question, the state can no longer support itself and this will lead to its inevitable dissolution. Here we see Nietzsche relating his philosophical insights to an account of modern society. Second, Nietzsche sees democracy, or the democratic will, as the catalyst for the fragmentation and final disintegration of the state. Thus, in contrast to Marxism where democracy is the result of the proletariat overthrow of the state, in Nietzsche’s account democracy is the cause of the state’s ‘withering away’.<sup>84</sup> That being said, we might draw an analogy between the idea of a permanent material union and the notion of the ‘administration of things’, although in Nietzsche’s case this union is not as democratic as the Marxists would have wanted, as I shall now turn to.<sup>85</sup> Nor would Nietzsche have had any sympathy with Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinist theory of the collapse of the state into political economy through a gradual self-disciplining of society, as elaborated in *Social Statics*,<sup>86</sup> which he saw as the victory of the herd.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> On this European dimension see S. Elbe, *Europe: A Nietzschean Perspective* (London, 2003) and D. Conway ‘Whither the “Good Europeans”?: Nietzsche’s New World Order’ in *South Central Review* 26, No. 3, 2009, pp. 40-60.

<sup>83</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge, 2007) #125.

<sup>84</sup> For Nietzsche’s (lack of) knowledge of Marx, see T. Brobjer, ‘Nietzsche’s Knowledge of Marx and Marxism’, *Nietzsche-Studien*, 31 (2002), pp. 298-313. Nietzsche’s knowledge of socialist thought was often mediated through Wagner.

<sup>85</sup> I am aware that in its original Saint-Simonean formulation it is not democratic either.

<sup>86</sup> See J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven, 2000), pp. 73-7. On Nietzsche’s knowledge of Darwinism, see J. Richardson, *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> *TI*, “Skirmishes”, # 14 “Anti-Darwin”: “Assuming...that there is such a struggle for existence...its result is unfortunately the opposite of what Darwin's school desires...The species do *not* grow in perfection: the weak prevail over the strong again and again, for they are the great majority”.

In Nietzsche's post-modern state future political hierarchy will still be a fact of life, much as it was in the Greek state and in his perfect Platonic state: both in the internal structuring of the 'new institutions' – as we saw with the poet-dictator – and in the relationship these institutions entertain with the outside world, which will demand a transfer of resources to them so that they may fulfil their cultural mission, much in the same way the slaves provided for the Olympian men in 'The Greek State', although on a new basis.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, for Nietzsche hierarchy is a fundamental and inescapable aspect of society. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) he writes: 'as long as there have been people, there have been herds of people as well, and a very large number of people who obey comparatively few who command'. He continues: 'so, considering the fact that humanity has been the best and most long-standing breeding ground for the cultivation of obedience so far, it is reasonable to suppose that the average person has an innate need to obey as a type of *formal conscience* that commands'.<sup>89</sup> Zarathustra (1885) echoes: 'wherever I found the living, there too I heard the speech of obedience. All living is obeying. And this is the second thing that I heard: the one who cannot obey himself is commanded. Such is the nature of the living'.<sup>90</sup>

Whilst the modern state may have lost its 'legitimacy', it is through this more ancient idea of an enduring instinct of commanding and obeying that Nietzsche desires to see authority restored. First intellectual authority in the 'new institutions' he proposes must be restored. Then these institutions, metamorphosed into the 'Party of life', must secure political authority through the same means of commanding and obeying and through fighting a 'war of spirits' against its opposing 'Party of

---

<sup>88</sup> In modern parlance we might think of this as something like an independent Arts Council which is allocated its resources through some form of state taxation.

<sup>89</sup> *BGE*, #199.

<sup>90</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [Z], trans. A. Del Caro (Cambridge, 2006) II, "Self-Overcoming".

Christianity'.<sup>91</sup> The future, according to Nietzsche, lies with those bold enough to attempt to command peoples again as they were in the past, and as they have always been. 'Who can command, who must obey – *here it is tried!*', Zarathustra proclaims. 'Human society: it is an experiment, this I teach – a long search: but it searches for the commander! – an experiment, oh my brothers! And *not* a "contract"!'.<sup>92</sup> If for Nietzsche the state did not arise through a contract, neither will his post-modern state ideal.

---

<sup>91</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. J. Norman (Cambridge, 2007) "Destiny", #1.

<sup>92</sup> Z, III, "Tables", #25. See also *GM*, II, #17: 'He who can command, who is naturally a "master"...what has he to do with contracts!'