

For Money/For Food. Nietzsche and the Waning of Culture

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Abstract

Nietzsche was fascinated by the problem of culture since his youth, and to this day his thoughts on the subject are still surprisingly fresh and relevant. His polemics on culture are recorded especially in the Basel conferences, published under the title On the Future of our Educational Institutions, and in the third of his Untimely Meditations, entitled Schopenhauer as Educator. According to Nietzsche, the most serious problem afflicting modern culture is its loss of independence. People are dealing no longer with an independent culture that is practised for its own sake, but with a culture that is subordinate to a purpose, heteronomous and deprived of its freedom. A useful culture. Useful, perhaps, as the modern-day catchphrases tell us, for finding a job, for money, for food. Useful, that is, for something. In the end, Nietzsche's diagnosis brings us to a single, inevitable conclusion: whenever it is considered as a means to something else, for whatever purpose, culture is tragically doomed to founder.

Keywords: Nietzsche, culture, On the Future of our Educational Institutions, money, food.

1. Culture that 'serves'

In the first of the six conferences held in Basel in 1872, the young Nietzsche makes a lucid diagnosis regarding the subordination of culture to the State. This great affliction that plagues modern culture, Nietzsche believed, conceals a further danger: all modernity – and especially culture – is geared to the pursuit of utility. In its process of maximum expansion, culture is focused purely on economic-political and professional interests, as well as profit-making practices: its propagation is one of the “most beloved of the dogmas of modern political economy”. In adopting the “seductive formula” in vogue in modern society, namely “knowledge and culture in the largest quantities possible, production and necessities in the largest quantities possible”, it becomes utilitarianistic: its “ultimate goal” is “utility” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I; cfr. NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 6; cfr. SABATINI, 1984, p. 208; cfr. BLAB, 1975, p. 448).

This general culture is a culture that “serves”, in the twofold meaning of the predicate: to literally serve (*Dienen*) the State and to be of service (*Nützen*) to the State. The verbal distinction in German is replaced in English by a homonym, which in this case is rendered paradoxically richer through the simplification of the subject. As the terms themselves overlap, their meanings seem to merge to the point of being interchangeable, as if the concept of ‘serving’ in the sense of ‘being of service to’ meant to ‘serve’ as synonymous with ‘service’, and thus, since it already contains the meaning, cannot signify anything else.

Nietzsche believed, however, that wherever there is utility, freedom is compromised. In becoming useful, culture is subordinated; as soon as it finds a goal outside of itself it loses its ultimate purpose – to be exercised for its own sake – and becomes a servant of the State, which only recognises culture it can use and benefit from. Utilitarian heteronomy offends true culture, which is transformed into technical-mechanical manual art. Utilitarian logic persists; it has merely moved to another level – the cultural, like the manual, also falls within the category of enterprise that serves some purpose.

Having penetrated the cultural sector (from which it seemed to be aprioristically excluded) utility joins forces with service to take away all sense of freedom from those who, though they may take pride in being truly educated, are only prepared to satisfy the needs of everyday life (cfr. NEGRI, 1978, pp. 134, 163-164, 168).

2. *Employees of culture*

Trapped in this situation, culture plays the dual role of accomplice and victim: while at first sight it appears to help strengthen the State, it does so at its own expense, since it is forced to go against its original spirit. On one hand, the educators are trained to “bring all the young people up to a level of education that is useful to the State”, and on the other, “the educands are completely dependent on exams and State-recognised qualifications”. Culture is set up as a tool of social mobility and promotion – “the feverish thirst of *progress*”, prompting a frantic race to education and the relative qualifications it promises. The State seeks to “rear useful officials as quickly as possible and guarantee their unconditional obedience”. This is pure social totalitarianism: “only a direction in life that is recognised and approved by the State can immediately bring about *social* distinction”. In modern society “the perfect man is the State employee”.

A job, however, even a permanent job, is not enough to fully satisfy the “utilitarian instinct” of such individuals. “Until their position is recognised and rewarded from above with a nice conferment of rank and order, until they can “show themselves”, they are destined to bear that certain degree of dissatisfaction which to the State is still more advantageous than contentment”. Young people therefore find themselves in a tight corner with only one hope: if they are to find a job and build a “family”, become successful and established in modern “society”, they must “be educated” in a certain way and obtain qualifications in the “State schools” that the State astutely links to the hundreds and hundreds of offices and jobs associated with them” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I; NIETZSCHE, 1969², II, *Vermischte Meinungen und Sprüche*, § 320; NIETZSCHE, 1969¹, *Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemäßen*, § 29; cfr. LOSURDO, 2004, p. 195; cfr. LOSURDO, 1999, pp. 266-293).

For this reason, the people of the modern age will not be educated in “*cultural institutions*”, but what Nietzsche called “*institutions for the necessities of life*”. Only the former are true institutions; the others are “all present-day institutions”, which fail to fulfil their highest purpose by doing no more than satisfying basic needs and catering to the immediate necessities of everyday existence. Tailor-made to modern man, they mould students assailed by the predominant concern of entering the labour market, enthralled by the prospect of the service they can render in the social universe into which they are destined to integrate. These are workers who, on the basis of “Hegelian influence”, will become part of a society in which everything is geared to utility and gain, covering a variety of roles: “employees, tradesmen, officials, wholesalers, farmers, doctors, technicians”. This intellectual work force is given a particular kind of training which, “at the end of the programme, can only offer a job or material gain”; not “cultural education”, “but merely an indication of the paths that may be followed in order to save and defend one’s own person, in the struggle for existence” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², IV; NIETZSCHE, 1997, 8 [57]; cfr. NEGRI, 1978, pp. 1453, 155).

3. *On the wave of Schopenhauer*

Schopenhauer was Nietzsche’s main source of inspiration. His short essay *OnUniversityPhilosophy*, from *ParergaandParalipomena*, was the starting-point for Nietzsche’s critique of the educational institution; Schopenhauer’s anti-Hegelian proposition, in fact, was reproduced, almost word for word and with the same brilliant images, both in his conferences and in the Third of his *Untimely Meditations, Schopenhauer as Educator* (cfr. MARTELLI, 1983, p. 94; cfr. NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 8).

In this pamphlet, Schopenhauer attacks the model of the Hegelian philosopher interpreted as a State employee, who practices philosophy not as the free pursuit of the truth but merely as a profession for economic gain. He is a charlatan who flaunts his philosophy for fame, the gratification of success and the praise of his superiors. This anti-statist debate served as a tool in his critique of Hegelianism: the condemnation of the State as the absolutely complete ethical organism, and the opposition of a university philosophy which, being “unconditionally useful to the State”, causes the entire purpose of human existence to be concentrated around the latter. The teachers of philosophy in the universities are nothing more than merchants of teaching posts in the pay of the State, who are forced to live off philosophy in order to feed their families. Alluding to Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, Schopenhauer likens modern-day teachers to the ancient sophists who, contrary to Socrates, philosophised not for love of the truth but only to earn a living; to this truth took second place. A true philosopher, therefore, cannot be a teacher of philosophy, and his *habitat* is certainly not the university. The place where authentic philosophy may be found is not the academic environment; indeed, it would be desirable for philosophy to cease being a profession represented by professors and disappear altogether from society.

According to Nietzsche, it should be pursued “outside of” the universities, far from “State power”, “salaries” and “honours” (cfr. NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 8; cfr. SCHOPENHAUER, 1992; cfr. GENTILI, 2001, p. 28).

4. *The God of money*

The supreme purpose to which culture is “enslaved” seems, therefore, to be money. In a modern age “swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy” and characterised by a frantic pursuit of “all the ways and means of making money as easily as possible”, culture “becomes increasingly useful from an economic perspective”. In modern times “there is a natural and necessary alliance between ‘wealth and culture’ – and even more to the point, this alliance seems to be a *moral* necessity” (NIETZSCHE, 1972¹, § 7; NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 4, § 6).

In today’s society people are “urged on day and night by a terrible impatience at seeing their wealth pile up so slowly, and by an equally terrible longing and love for these heaps of gold. In this impatience and love, however, we see re-appear once more that fanaticism of the *desire for power* which was stimulated in former times by the belief that we were in the possession of truth (...) Money now stands for power, glory, pre-eminence, dignity and influence; money at the present time acts as a greater or lesser moral prejudice for a man in proportion to the amount he may possess”. The death of God is not the end; Nietzsche even suggests that “given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown”. Once God is done away with, new idols – including money – will take his place; convinced they are finally rid of him, the people in the secularised city remain the unsuspecting victims of the totalitarian logic which was once bound to the worship of truth/divinity but now lies, with the same degree of power, in money. With sacrifices offered to the new god of modernity, in the now desecrated temple of the city the secular rite of the modern age takes place. “What was once done ‘for the love of God’ is now done for the love of money, i.e. for the love of that which at present affords us the highest feeling of power and a good conscience” (NIETZSCHE, 1970¹, §§ 203, 204; NIETZSCHE, 1973¹, § 108; cfr. WIENAND, 2000-2001, pp. 91-98; cfr. SIMMEL, 1998).

Thus, as far back as in the late 19th Century, Nietzsche predicted, with prophetic foresight, that under the pressure of “world trade” the day would come when “money would force Europe to come together under one single power” (NIETZSCHE, 1974, 37 [9]).

5. *Cultural commerce*

It is money, therefore, and clearly not culture, that holds together men and nations, becoming the measure of all things. In fact, in today’s society where “everything now depends on money” and whose “soul” is the “carrying on of trade”, this is merely “the skill with which one learns all the easiest ways of making money and dominates all the means useful to commerce (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I; NIETZSCHE, 1970¹, § 175; NIETZSCHE, 1969², II, *Vermischte Meinungen und Sprüche*, § 310; cfr. CAMPIONI, 1993, p. 89). People’s goals will no longer be in culture, but in “luxury” and “fashion”, leading to the total mundanisation of culture itself, which, regarded as a “means”, will be crudely subordinated to the seductions of “gain”. Its ultimate purpose becomes “the greatest possible pecuniary gain”. Educated man will be hired solely to sell culture and will be no more than the “shopman of the intellect and the ‘porter’ of culture”. Indeed, it will be seen as “something of use”, “mistaking culture for that which is of use” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I; NIETZSCHE, 1973¹, § 366; NIETZSCHE, 1997, 8 [57]).

Following this simple and highly effective utilitarian logic (maximum wealth in the easiest way and shortest time possible) the State astutely exploits culture for the own interests, turning it into a profitable business. The scale of values of modernity reads: “the more the money, the greater the culture” – and, vice versa, the more culture is produced, the greater the pecuniary gain for society. Culture, thus maximised in its needs and its very essence, is now required only to contribute to economic profit and success, individual and social, thereby depriving it of its meaning and original richness. It becomes culture with a ‘price’ but no longer any ‘value’. The general opinion will be that educated people are only those who work towards improving their own economic conditions and, consequently, that education is an inalienable right of every human being, and diplomas in culture will begin to be handed out to everyone (NIETZSCHE, 1985, III, *Von alten und neuen Tafeln*, § 12; NIETZSCHE, 1997, 35 [12]; cfr. CIUSA, 1992, p. 100).

The hypocrisy of modern culture goes even further, generating a vicious circle which, in a double paradox, places man in a deadlock. While the need for culture is maximised, in fact, its tempo is minimised: “culture conforming to the age reaches its apex in culture conforming to the instant”. The vast majority of people are required to gain a ‘rapid culture’, to quickly become ‘intelligent employees’ and make money in as short a time possible.

And because “man is allowed culture only in so far as it involves gain”, this culture (the first paradox) must be “sufficiently well-founded” if it is to produce “individuals capable of making a *great amount* of money”. At the same time (the second paradox), man “is expected to achieve such a measure”. Therefore, not only are young people not given any possibility of culture without the certainty of future economic prosperity, but they are inescapably obliged by the modern system to dedicate themselves completely to achieving a good level of that same culture that will subsequently be used exclusively for material gain (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I; NIETZSCHE, 1997, 8 [57]; cfr. CIUSA, 1992, p. 101).

6. “Current men”

This situation denounced by Nietzsche has detrimental repercussions on man, causing the loss of his innermost humanity. Modern society regards culture as no more than a means of creating the “highest possible number of ‘current’ men, in the sense that one speaks of currency in money”. Compared to money, the human being is disfigured; society will be dominated by current men with no identity, easily expendable, and only capable of evaluating things in terms of their economic utility. Men engaged in the labour market and considered only for their exchange value; humans as a commodity, who, “levelled by the spirit of the market”, have lost their own “individual quality” and regard as superfluous any degree of self-awareness that goes beyond the mere setting of a price. Human beings caught up in the grueling vortex of incessant everyday needs and trapped in the nerveracking maelstrom of the satisfying of desires, who, seeking to appropriate culture “as a means to their selfish ends”, consider it only in quantitative terms. In embracing totally the utilitarian ideals presented by the “fashionable pseudo-culture of the ‘current age’”, they weigh their knowledge as if it were merchandise and regard it as a mere instrument of gain (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I, III, IV; NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 6; NIETZSCHE, 1970², 6 [200]; cfr. ALFIERI, 1984, p. 328; cfr. NEGRI, 1993, pp. 40, 68-71, 136; cfr. SCHMIDT-MILLARD, 1982, pp. 37-38). Demonstrating how money pervades every sphere of human life, from language to thought itself, these ‘current’ men will speak with current “coin-words” and think in “coin-concepts” (NIETZSCHE, 1972¹, § 10).

In the middle class society (the world of merchandise) the “value of all things” is established on the basis of quantity and the time needed to produce them, and fixed according to “the demand and the offer” as well as the “needs of consumers”. The omnipotence of the idol Money reduces man to a commodity. Modern society reifies interhuman relations and turns them into mere exchanges of goods, going as far as monetizing everything, even humanity itself. Thus men are given a “price”, and cease to be “persons” (NIETZSCHE, 1970¹, §§ 75, 206; cfr. LÖWITH, 2000, p. 268; cfr. MARTELLI, 1983, pp. 75, 81-82). Here everything is reduced to its exchange value and held tightly in the net of interest, including young people, now moulded to suit the demands of the market and subjected to the yoke of employment. In relation to this, the purpose of modern education must be to “help every individual to progress to the extent to which his nature allows him to become ‘current’ and develop him in such a way as to draw from the amount of knowledge and skill he possesses the greatest possible gain” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I; cfr. NEGRI, 1978, p. 143).

Furthermore, ‘current’ means not only ‘valid’, i.e. in accordance with the needs of the day, but also ‘mediocre’, accommodating, willing to give up being anything other than what one is, in an historical time and a civil situation in which it is only possible to do, think and want that which is done, thought and wanted. The present time inexorably exhausts all man’s existential possibilities: the Pindaric “Become such as you are” is sacrificed on the altar of utility (cfr. NEGRI, 1982, p. 64).

7. Culture puts food on the table

Nietzsche was aware that he lived in an age in which the “deafening and continual cry” gives “the impression that there was an unprecedented thirst for culture which eagerly sought to be quenched”: an age in which the greatest unhappiness will consist precisely in “no longer having needs” (NIETZSCHE, 1997, 8[57]). It is here, “without being disconcerted by the thundering noise of the education-mongers, that we must confront those who talk so tirelessly about the educational necessities of their time”. These are the teachers of the modern schools: “those blatant heralds of educational needs, when examined at close quarters, are suddenly seen to be transformed into zealous, yea, fanatical opponents of true culture”. Nietzsche identifies one of the problems of culture as being the “profusion of public schools and teachers, which is manifestly out of all proportion”. As the number of pupils continues to grow and the institutions are increasingly “overcrowded”, the need for more teachers increases proportionally (NIETZSCHE, 1973², III; NIETZSCHE, 1969², II, *Vermischte Meinungen und Sprüche*, § 320; NIETZSCHE, 1969¹, *Was den Deutschen abgeht*, §5).

On the surface this is an obvious solution, but it conceals a hidden snare. This frantic multiplication of schools does not at all solve the problem of culture – “as a result, in fact, far too many people with no true calling end up as teachers, and then, due to their overwhelming numbers and the instinct of ‘*similissimilargaudet*’, they come to define the spirit of those institutions”. “The main reason for the precariousness of the spiritual conditions” lies precisely in this “overabundance of teachers”, as a result of which pupils “learn little and poorly”. It is not possible, in fact, to turn culture into a quantitative factor – despite this overwhelming increase in “teachers”, there will always be a lack of “educators”.

Nietzsche was increasingly of the view that culture cannot be destined for “the great masses”, but only for a “very small number of men”, for whose development an extremely low number of higher education institutions is sufficient”. Therefore, “those who believe that this great quantity of gymnasiums and teachers can be turned into true abundance without decreasing their number must be kept away from pedagogical issues”. And it is precisely the “vast majority of teachers” themselves who do not feel the need to reform the educational institutions; they merely “request, loudly and insistently, that new public schools and new institutions of higher education be created, feeling themselves quite at home in these institutions, as their moderate abilities stand in a kind of harmonious relationship to the dullness of their pupils”. The “best teachers”, those who are “worthy of this honorable name”, are, on the other hand, “perhaps the least fitted, in view of the present standing of our public schools, for the education of these unselected youths, huddled together in a confused heap” and must “rather, to a certain extent, keep hidden from them the best they could give” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², III; NIETZSCHE, 1969², II, *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, § 282; NIETZSCHE, 1969¹, *Was den Deutschen abgeht*, § 5).

Nietzsche’s critique reflects fully the trend of modern mass society, in which a citizen’s existence depends on his job and relative salary. A number of people, in fact, become teachers simply to fill a gap, a need that has been created. Rather than a vocation, therefore, teaching becomes merely a way to earn a living – not an “end” in itself, but a “means of securing a good income”, exercised “without the *pleasure* of working”. Thus the schools find themselves full of teachers who “have nothing to do with culture” but hypocritically set themselves up as “teachers who show the way to culture”. They have chosen this path only because, due to the excessively high number of schools, “there is a demand for them”, and now, heedful of the “cry of the empty stomach” they assert their claims for professional reasons and for the purpose of earning a living” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², III; NIETZSCHE, 1973¹, § 42; NIETZSCHE, 1972², §§ 6, 8; cfr. GUTSCHMIDT, 2005, p. 100). This overabundance of teachers creates a very bizarre situation. The demand for a large number of teachers leads to the need for an equally large number of schools: “the educational tendency of the public school *must* actually conform to this surplus of teachers” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², III). It is no longer the large number of teachers, therefore, that have to adapt to an overabundance of public schools or an excessive influx of students; paradoxically, it is quite the opposite: rather than training the teachers needed for the schools already present in the area, new schools are built and teaching methods are devised on the basis of the inordinate number of teachers in need of a job. It is no longer man who chooses to approach culture but, vice versa, culture that is forced to adapt to man and his needs.

8. *Educated to work*

A great many of these superfluous teachers, however, will not find work in the schools. “Whither shall they fly?” asks Nietzsche. “Will they not be sacrificed to the powers of the present age?” For these teachers he foresees two different paths. The first is suggested in the third conference and consists in taking refuge in the “more obtuse, micrological and sterile scientificity”. Hounded by the shrieking demand of culture, they will “end, like the ostrich, by burying their heads in the sand”. They will “lead a life like that of the ants, distanced from true culture” – and this distance takes the name of erudition and scientific specialism (NIETZSCHE, 1973², III).

The second path appears two years later, in the third *Untimely Meditation*. These teachers, having been “denied” a professional outlet that would provide them with a “salary”, finding there is no place for them in the schools they have no other option but to quickly abandon the teaching world and be “scattered” everywhere “in search of” other activities. “One will become a parson, another a schoolmaster, another will creep into an editorship, another write school-books for young ladies’ colleges, the wisest of them will plough the fields, the vainest go to court”. And as they converge in structures that provide them with a “roof” and a “job”, these bad teachers will no longer be a danger to culture. Swinging between disdain and irony, however, this solution also has a tragic side. Since the ‘cultural’ invariably goes hand in hand with the ‘social’, in fact, such a solution represents not merely an invective against the figure of the teacher, but indirectly gives rise to a harsh critique against society *toutcourt*, an implicit denouncement of the labour market.

Thus there begins to take shape a concept of work which (albeit not explicitly) seems to develop outside of the dimension of authentic culture, as, segregated in settings that Nietzsche criticized as alien to true culture, everyday jobs appear as belittled and devalued. Compared to these “middle class professions”, in fact, he seemed to prefer even rural life, claiming that it is better to “take up the plow” than to go and work in these places of “pseudoculture” (NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 8).

9. Beyond utility?

If this is how things stand, Nietzsche believed that there are no two ways of dealing with it: authentic culture must refuse any kind of enslavement; it must not “serve” anything. Without end, without purpose. A thing of “uselessness”, beyond utility, unfettered by the necessities of human existence, something which must not and cannot be used as a profession for earning a living. “An end in itself”, free of charge, socially disinterested, above the social fray. (NIETZSCHE, 1969¹, *Was den Deutschen abgeht*, § 5; NIETZSCHE, 1997, 14 [15]; cfr. CIUSA, 1992, p. 99). Nevertheless, in an age that is “hostile to all that is useless”, the remote characteristics of culture – uselessness, independence, solitude, autonomy and slowness – would prove to be uncomfortable and counterproductive. Confirmation of this typically modern mentality is found on the opposite side. “All culture is loathed which isolates” and which, placing itself above market dynamics, “sets goals beyond money and gain”. Those that should be the true virtues of culture are not viewed at all favourably by modern society, inasmuch as they are completely detached from its logic: a culture which “begins only in a sphere that lies far above the world of necessity, indigence and struggle for existence” will be labelled as useless and counterproductive and accused of being “immoral” and “selfish” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², I, IV; NIETZSCHE, 1972², § 6). Ultimately, Nietzsche remains a catastrophist: true culture will no longer find a place in the modern metropolis, where people have become too accustomed to a culture inundated with the phenomenon of usability. In the cities of men, culture loses its freedom and beauty as it sheds the Aristotelian gown of uselessness that made it superior to all other things. The “refined, tenderfooted, ethereal goddess” leaves her ivory tower and enters the homes of men where, mistaken for a culture outfitted as a “useful handmaiden”, she becomes a “servant and intellectual adviser in matters of poverty, earning a living and the necessities of life” (NIETZSCHE, 1973², IV; cfr. NEGRI, 1978, p. 155). Extravagant and non-conformist as always, here Nietzsche shows his characteristic inclination to polemic, expressing himself at times forcefully and uncompromisingly, and more given to *pars destruens* than to *pars construens*. Frequently, however, his philosophy is expressed in all its persuasive power as it brings us back to a starting-point that focuses not so much on what it proposes as what it demolishes. More than a century later, his critique of culture appears to us, as citizens of the 21st-Century, surprisingly contemporary, hitting extremely close to home. If we are able to hear them, we are sure to be provoked and shaken by Nietzsche’s warnings. At least in some respects, they will force our civilisation to take a good look at itself and, once again taking up the challenge, to bring constant rebirth out of its wanings.

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