Georges Palante
Review of “Schopenhauer und Nietzsche ein vortragszyklus” by Georg Simmel
July-December 1907

Retrieved on 2016-10-28 from http://marxists.architexturez.net/archive/palante/1907/simmel.htm
Source: *Revue Philosophique*, year 32, Vol 64 July-December 1907;
Translated: by Mitch Abidor for marxists.org;

Review of “Schopenhauer und Nietzsche ein vortragszyklus” by Georg Simmel

Georges Palante

July-December 1907

M. G Simmel’s book develops within an intellectual framework wider than that in which historical-critical studies of this kind usually move. For the author it’s not a question of studying Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s work in detail, but of drawing up a balance sheet of modern culture by taking as typical examples of this culture the two great philosophical figures who sum up its essential oppositions. In other words, M. Simmel’s goal is to study Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in function of modern culture.

In the first chapter the author formulates the respective positions of the two thinkers confronting this culture. The two philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are the perfect expression of our state of civilization. The characteristic of all advanced societies – which as a result of this are both differentiated and complicated – is the need for unity, for a final end (Endzweck) capable of conferring a meaning on it. For a long time Christianity satisfied this

need for unity. Today it has lost its hold over souls, but the need for unity survives.

Schopenhauer's philosophy expresses that nostalgia for a final and total unity. The Schopenhauerian will-to-life, dominated by the law of the insatiability of desire, and incapable of resting on a final goal, is the symbol of this. The consideration of a universe propelled by the will for a goal and yet deprived of a goal is also Nietzsche's point of departure. But between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche there is Darwin. While Schopenhauer stops at the negation of a final goal and concludes at the negation of the will-to-life, Nietzsche finds in mankind's evolution the possibility of a goal that permits life to affirm itself. In Schopenhauer it is the horror of life that is affirmed, in Nietzsche it's the sentiment of life's magnificence. The Superman is the formula of life's ascension, which always surpasses itself, in opposition to the eternal monotony of the Schopenhauerian universe. In a remarkable parallel between the two thinkers M. Simmel remarks that Nietzsche better answers than Schopenhauer the aspirations of the modern spirit. "This ascendance of life is the great and imperishable consolation which, thanks to Nietzsche, has become the light of our modern intellectual landscape. This fundamental concept makes us forget the anti-social form which it clothes itself in in Nietzsche, so that despite this anti-social tendency Nietzsche appears, compared to Schopenhauer, as a much more fitting expression of the modern life feeling. And it is the tragic side of Schopenhauer's destiny that with superior forces he defended the lesser cause. Schopenhauer is an incomparably more profound thinker than Nietzsche, a brilliant metaphysician, hearing in the depths of his soul the mysterious sounds of universal existence. It is not the metaphysical instinct that inspires Nietzsche: it's the genius of the psychologist and the moralist that dominate in him. But he lacks the grand style of Schopenhauer, which bursts from tension of the thinker towards the mystery of things, and not only of man and his value; this grand style

that seems to be refused in the most singular fashion to men of the greatest psychological finesse."

Of the seven chapters that follow, five are dedicated to Schopenhauer and two to Nietzsche. As concerns Schopenhauer, we should note the penetrating critique to which M. Simmel submits pessimism.. He notes that Schopenhauer's pessimism is not based on the amount of suffering, but on this statement of principle: evil is an *a priori* of life. It is a function of desire, the essence of life. To a system based on the psychological observation that desire is accompanied by pain and its satisfaction by pleasure, must be opposed a psychological refutation. In the will Schopenhauer only considers the obstacle or the departure and arrival points. He forgets the trajectory between the two end points, a trajectory each step of which is accompanied by pleasure, be it only the pleasure of anticipation. This refutation is identical to that of Guyau, who is not quoted by M. Simmel. Schopenhauer's successors wanted to add empirical proofs to the metaphysical proof of evil: the sum of the evil surpasses the sum of the good. Again like Guyau, M. Simmel remarks that the comparison isn't possible. And Schopenhauer, faithful to his principle of the metaphysical unity of the will and consequently of universal suffering, doesn't linger over the question of the distribution of good and evil among individuals. To the contrary, any system resting on the differentiation of individuals and their absolute reality is especially attached to the question of distribution. An example: socialism.

Of the two chapters on Nietzsche one is called "Human Values and Decadence," and the other "The Morality of Distinction." Schopenhauer recognizes only one value, non-life. Nietzsche glorifies life. Nietzsche attacks Christianity, which sacrifices the strong to the weak and, because of this, is a decadence. But there is a misunderstanding in the thought of Nietzsche: he looks only at the moral side of Christianity and not at its transcendental value. In reality Christianity and Nietzsche exalt the individual. But while for Nietzsche it reaches its apex in this life, for Christianity it only

reaches it in the Kingdom of God. Nietzsche doesn't see in Christianity the intensive cultivation of the soul, he only sees its practical altruism. He only sees the act of charity, he doesn't see the intense state that precedes it. He only sees the centrifugal force and not the centripetal. Nietzsche denies God: the opposition between God and the I demands this. Only Schleiermacher was able to reconcile the two by absorbing the one in the other. To the Kingdom of God Nietzsche substitutes the idea of a humanity realized by individuals of the elite, which he opposes to that of society. Goethe too had isolated "*das allgemein-menschliche*." Nietzsche says: humanity only lives in individuals and not in society. The progress of the individual is the progress of society. From the point of view of the social concept the individual is a point of intersection of social threads. From the Nietzschean point of view the individual is a reality: he sums up a line of man that exited up to his arrival. And if this line is an ascending line the individual incarnates humanity's progress. M. Simmel opposes Nietzschean individualism to liberalism.

A propos of Nietzchean aristocratism M. Simmel cleverly compares Nietzsche and M. Maeterlinck. Nietzsche places the value of life in a few elite individuals and a few heroic hours, culminating points of individual existence, "rupture of the equilibrium of our pendulum between heaven and earth." M. Maeterlinck places the values of life in daily existence and in each of its moments. There is no need of the heroic, the catastrophic, the exceptional. "Learn to venerate the small hours of life." This is the same idea as that expressed in the worker aesthetic of the sculptor Meunier: the individual, aristocratic, and esthetic value and charm of the individual, but who only counts as an equal drawn from a crowd of his peers. Maeterlinck makes the democratic evaluation descend into the infinite of the individual soul.

The final chapter, "The Morality of Distinction," contains many ideas no less subtle and ingenious. Thus the remark that it is not the act but being that gives a man his rank. Society only respects

what a man does; humanity, on the other hand, only profits from what a man **is**. M. Simmel recalls here the phrase of Schiller: "Noble natures count for what they are; common natures for what they do."

We have gone on at length on this book that deserves a special place in Nietzschean literature, a book fertile in ingenious connections, penetrating criticisms, and subtle psychological and sociological observations. In summary the two essential points to be noted are: the refutation of Schopenhauerian pessimism through Guyau's concepts, and the refutation of Nietzschean aristocratism through the moral democratism of Maeterlinck. M. Simmel reproaches Schopenhauer for only taking into account extreme states, pain and pleasure, and neglecting transitional states. He reproaches Nietzsche for only paying attention to the summits of life and heroic hours, and neglecting daily life and anonymous hours, that continuity that forms the uninterrupted and solid course of our destiny.