

Nietzsche's *Übermensch*: the notion of a higher Aristocracy of the future*

El *Übermensch* de Nietzsche: la noción de la alta aristocracia del futuro

Recibido: 20 de noviembre de 2009 - Revisado: 9 de diciembre de 2009 - Aceptado: 15 de enero de 2010

Ingrid Flórez Fortich**

*Before God! But now this God has died. You higher men, this God was your greatest danger.
It is only since he lies in his tomb that you have been resurrected.
Only now the great noon comes; only now the higher man becomes – lord.
You higher men! Only now is the mountain of man's future in labour. God died: now we want the
overman to live.
(Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 1966, 286-87)*

Resumen

El artículo discute la idea del *Übermensch* en Nietzsche como parte de su radical crítica a la cristiandad y la crisis de la modernidad. Su idea del *Übermensch* es expuesta en la mayoría de su obra, en particular en sus libros *Así habló Zarathustra* y *La gaya ciencia*, un hombre nuevo que ha superado la tiranía de la religión y de la razón moderna, la alta aristocracia del futuro. Este artículo explora la relación entre *Übermensch* y religión, *Übermensch* y el hombre moderno, *Übermensch* y la voluntad de poder con el objetivo de esbozar implicaciones políticas de la idea del *Übermensch* en relación con la teoría política.

Palabras clave

Nietzsche, *Übermensch*, superhombre, voluntad de poder.

Abstract

The article discusses the idea of *Übermensch* in Nietzsche as part of his critique to Christianity and the crisis of modernity. The idea of *Übermensch* is expounded in most of his Works in particular in his books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*. A new man that has overcome the tyranny of religion and modern reason: the higher aristocracy of the future. The article explores the relationship between *Übermensch* and religion, *Übermensch* and man, *Übermensch* and will to power. With the aim of outline some political implications of the idea of *Übermensch* with regard to political theory.

Keywords

Nietzsche, *Übermensch*, overman, will to power.

* Proyecto de Investigación: "Nietzsche and Political Theory"
International Islamic University Malaysia

** Politóloga y especialista en Análisis de Políticas Públicas. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, máster en Ciencias Políticas. International Islamic University Malaysia.
Correo electrónico:
imffortich@yahoo.com.mx

Introduction

The doctrine of *Übermensch* is treated in some detail in his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*. Through the prophet Zarathustra, Nietzsche expounds his diagnosis of modernity as decadence and nihilism. Zarathustra announced the death of the modern man and the advent of a new man, *Übermensch*, who has liberated from the tyranny of reason.

Nietzsche opposed most of the commanding ideals of his own generation, especially the notion of equality. Indeed, the idea of *Übermensch* has been considered by some interpreters as an aristocratic attempt to reevaluate modern politics. According to Hoover (1994, 167), Nietzsche did not consider his age one of automatic progress or inevitable enlightenment. On the contrary, he saw it as possibly the final chapter in the dwarfing of man, the levelling and mediocritization of humans that has begun with Socrates and Christ.

Against the ideal of equity and progress, Nietzsche pitted the counter ideal of *Übermensch*: ‘Doesn’t it seem’, he noted, ‘that a single will dominated Europe for eighteen centuries –to turn man into a sublime miscarriage?’. For Nietzsche, the modern era have to be overcome a revaluation of the Christian values is an imperative for the *Übermensch*.

Most Nietzsche scholars prefer to render the term *Übermensch* as ‘superman’ or ‘overman’. Some prefer to leave the word in the original since there is no good English equivalent. Detwiller (1990), in his book *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, argues that the word ‘superman’ allows us to tie the translation to others words use ‘super’ like ‘superhuman’ or ‘superhistorical’. However, others scholars such as Kaufman (1974) prefer to connect the *Übermensch* with *Überwindung* in its sense of overcoming.

As Nietzsche notes in the first speech, the prophet Zarathustra made to the people began: ‘I teach you the overman. Man is something that should be overcome (*Überwunden*). What have you done to overcome him’ (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1966, 3).

This paper explores the idea of *Übermensch* in Nietzsche through some of the main Nietzsche scholars in the English literature who have attempted to link Nietzsche and politics. The First section discusses *Übermensch* and religion, *Übermensch* as an ideal against the modern man. The second and third section, analyse the relationship between *Übermensch* and man, and the characterization of the enigmatic *Übermensch*. Finally, the fourth section examines the political implications of his concept of the *Übermensch* and a conclusion about some criticisms and implication for political theory.

I. *Übermensch* and Religion

The superman is precisely the one who knows that God is dead and that religion no longer control us. He knows that his kind needs no God for meaning that one can comfortably live in a meaningless universe because one organizes a portion of it for oneself.
(*The Gay Science*, 1974, 585)

The first time Nietzsche used the term *Übermensch* was in an aphorism of his book *The Gay Science*, where he criticized the Jewish ideal of monotheism and warned that it could make man as stagnant as most other species. Against the Hebrew ideal of a ‘normal man’ he placed the Greek ideal of *Freigeisterei und Vielgeisterei* (the free spirited and many spirited mentality). In his view, the Greeks had men, but they had in addition a delightful menagerie of *Übermenschen*, *Untermenschen* and *Nebemenschen* (overmen, undermen, and paramen).

The Greeks rejected the idea of equality or conformity. Nietzsche longed for the return

of such a culture where we could once again afford 'the luxury of individuals'. According to Nietzsche, by stifling this individualism, monotheism was 'perhaps the greatest danger that has yet confronted humanity' (Hoover, 1994, 168).

In his book *The Antichrist*, he argues that with the modern collapse of Christian monotheism the way has been opened up for a reconsideration of superior men. He noted, 'without Christian theism as a buttress the modern doctrine of equality appears to be a great impertinence' (43). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 'we used to be equal before God, but his God has Died, since God has become unbelievable belief in equality has become equally impossible for a rational person. It is the time for us to reaffirm the order of ranks to intensify the 'pathos of distance' that creates the psychology of the superior man. Indeed the free spirits of modernity find themselves challenged by a momentous new task.

He knows that the church ruined European man by standing all valuations on their head, by casting suspicion on joy in beauty, by breaking the strong, by bending everything mainly into agony of conscience, by inverting love of the earth into hatred of the earth. The church botched the enhancement of man when it had the golden opportunity to hammer him into something beautiful. Nietzsche imagines an Epicurean God viewing this great failure and despairing (Hoover, 1994, 171).

Nietzsche's thought represents a response against the Christian world and its hierarchies. For him, nihilism is a central trend in the modern age as a consequence of the devaluation of values by Christianity. The *Übermensch* is a key concept in Nietzsche's idea of the revaluation of values. The *Übermensch* represents a new way of thinking beyond the dichotomy between good and evil.

II. *Übermensch* and Man

*What is great in man, Zarathustra declared,
is that he is a bridge and not an end
Man is a rope, tied between beast and
overman—a rope over an abyss.
And man shall be just that for the overman; a
laughing stock or a painful embarrassment.
Therefore do not spend any time or energy on
man! Mankind is not our goal but the superman.
(Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 1966, 4)*

Nietzsche harboured the strong conviction that man had some developmental potential. 'Man is still unexhausted for the greatest possibilities'. Nietzsche stated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that 'Man is his present state, weighed down by his bad conscience, is truly a sick animal, but perhaps this condition is like pregnancy, a sickness heavy with the future possibilities, Man is such incomplete, transitional creature that it almost seems as if nature had some future plans for him, as if man were not an end but only a way, an episode a bridge, a great promise'.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra said that man is something that nature intended to be overcome. Zarathustra asked to the audience: what have you done to overcome him? Most people who first heard Zarathustra's question lived in a culture that eulogized equality, democracy and socialism, anarchism, or feminism; yet Nietzsche says these will not produce the superman but 'the last man' man at the end of his developmental tether.

Indeed, Nietzsche considers liberal democracy and revolutionary socialism as symptoms of a weak will that demands equality. The central goal is not equality but to breed perfect beings, 'free spirits'. The *Übermensch's* superior autonomy excludes attachments with the 'herd' and its politics; ideologies are an obstacle to his perfectionism.

III. *Übermensch*: the free spirits

The highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured. He will obviously frighten religious people, because religion always seeks the extirpation of the drives.
(*The Gay Science*, 585)

Who is this superior man? According to Nietzsche, he is not a blond beast, an Aryan racist monster who murders at will and justifies it by some romantic primitivism, although the superman has no obligation to show pity to his inferiors (Hoover, 1997)

Nietzsche's concept of race was not the romantic –biological racism of many of his contemporaries; he felt that a higher man could theoretically come from 'the most widely different places and cultures. Nietzsche said only 'scholarly oxen' would interpret his superman in terms of Darwinian evolution. To him, *Übermensch* is not self–preservation as in the Darwinian code but self– domination.

The superman is not necessarily a perfect physical specimen, a strong, healthy, athletic man. A sublime man could have the highest value even if he is terribly delicate and fragile, because an abundance of very difficult and rare things has been bred and preserved together through many generations (*The Gay Science*, 998).

When he speaks of a 'higher type' that will become the 'higher aristocracy of the future', he is talking about the *Übermensch*. But this must therefore be the same group depicted as the "new aristocracy" or 'the future masters of the earth', the 'legislators of the future', the 'free spirits of the future', the coming 'master race', the coming 'ruling caste'- all of which must mean the same as his 'higher sovereign species' his 'stronger race', or 'stronger type'.

As Zarathustra complained, 'never yet has there been an overman. Naked saw I both

the greatest and the smallest man. They are still all –too-similar to each other. Verily even the greatest I found all– too- human'. The superior men of the past have been 'fortunate accidents'. There is an obvious reference to the Greeks in his works, but usually the higher types are but 'lucky strokes of evolution' that easily perish.

Our future however, could be different, because we may live to see the superman willed or bred, deliberately cultivates a process known to every great aristocracy in history, by acquiring laboriously all the virtues and efficiency of body and soul little by little, through self –constrain, limitation, faithful repetition of the same labours, the same renunciations. But there are men who are the heirs and masters of this slowly acquired manifold treasure of virtue and efficiency. In the end there appears a man, monsters of energy, who demands a monster of a task (*The Gay Science*, 995).

This monster of energy is not a bad beginning definition of the superman; one must start with the body, the splendid animal, a creature with powerful drives, vigorous passions, robust health, unusual strength, overflowing vitality. But these are only the conditions for the superman; the sufficient cause must be something in addition to the healthy body. The sufficient cause involves a will that controls the passions and presses them into service, a will that rides the string drives (Hoover, 1994).

IV. *Übermensch* and Will to Power

All beings seek to discharge their power and to dominate,

The will of power always encounters and seeks to overcome resistance.

The overman is self— domination and domination of other.

In the future, man will be hammered into unique specimens whose values will be determined by power. 'What determines your

rank is the quantum of power you are' (*The Gay Science*, 858). 'Order of rank is order of power'. Power here means holistic human power, strength of both body and soul, both physical and spiritual.

These superior men of the future will be the finest possible incarnations of the will to power. In them the primitive urge of the everlasting cosmos thrusts forward a new, higher form of culture (*The Gay Science*, 776). They will be "synthetic", "justifying" men who will invent a "higher form of being" while dominating the mechanized, atomized masses for our modern age. Indeed, the contemporary dwarfing of mankind would have no meaning whatever did it not issue in this "stronger species" this "higher type" of man. Their advent will open a new chapter in the enhancement of life, for they will be beyond good and evil.

These supermen will recall the great "founding fathers" of all previous history in that they will establish new valuations, and force the "will of millennia upon new tracks", they will have that "great quantum of power" by which one is "able to give direction". These artistic will be masters of dissimulation and cunning, like Caesar and Napoleon. No man in history has perfectly embodied all these traits but some have come close, like Goethe.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche complained that great men are usually misunderstood by the populace, who think that religion is an inevitable ingredient of greatness. But Goethe, like Caesar, Homer, Leonardo, exhibited "slackness, scepticism, immorality, the right to throw off a faith".

Nietzsche found the superman difficult to describe since he has never fully existed and belongs to the future. But if once you catch this vision, you must work to make him possible. Nietzsche makes a good case for human inequality; we can at least say, with Schacht, that he shifts the burden of proof to the egalitarians.

If one studies human life and history carefully, one will have to conclude that man gives us a 'wealth types' rather than the basic sameness you would expect from creatures of the same biological species.

If God is dead and religion invalid, if human life is to have any meaning at all, then Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is a very ambitious attempt to 'redeem' mankind's existence. That is why Zarathustra exclaimed: 'be-hold I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth!'

One might presume that the superman, once here would dominate the earth for a long time, like the thousand – year Reich of recent memory. Nietzsche warns us that this is not necessarily true. This would be to fall into error of Darwinism, that longevity is the touchstone of value. On the contrary, 'duration as such has no value'. The strong races and the strong men tend to destroy each other: 'all great ages are paid for. Quality is more important than duration. 'One might prefer a shorter but more valuable existence for the species' (Hoover, 172).

Conclusion: political implications

According to some interpreters, when Nietzsche politicizes his philosophy in the relationship between *Übermensch* and his doctrine of will to power, he describes human agency in the language of exploitation, domination, struggle, mastery over others, and hierarchy.

In Addition, according Warren (1988, 208) Nietzsche was often able to provide uniquely incisive criticisms of modern political ideologies. At the same time, he could not account for every political effect he observed, even those of most importance to his main philosophical problematic. His political idea of a hierarchical society with a small leadership of aristocrat – philosophers as the most desirable of all possible political organizations in

postmodern world, in this way his philosophy is seen to be inconsistent with his politics.

According to Conway (1997, 114) it may be fruitful to regard the enigmatic *Übermensch* in terms of the possibilities that arise when decadence itself is treated as a potentially productive context for reconstituting the human soul. Although Nietzsche claims many times in Zarathustra that ‘man is something that must be overcome’ he never suggests that postmodern man –his *Übermensch*– would consist of anything that does not in some ways exist in present man.

References

- Conway, D. W. (1997). *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kaufmann, W. A. (1974). *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1966). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, a book for all and none*. London: Penguin Books.
- Nietzsche, F. (1973). *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the future*.
- Nietzsche, F. (1974). *The Gay Science*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Hoover, A. J. (1994). *Friedrich Nietzsche: His Life and Thought*, Westport: Praeger.
- Detwiler, B. (1990). *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Warren, M. (1988), *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Wider, N. (2003). ‘Nietzsche’, Boucher and Kelly (Ed.), *Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the present*, Oxford University Press.