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Nietzsche on Slavery: Exploring the Meaning and Relevance of Nietzsche's Perspective

Dmitri Safronov

Abstract

Nietzsche is absent from today's growing debate on slavery past and present. In this article I argue that his views on the subject add a pertinent, if challenging, dimension to this wide-ranging discussion. Nietzsche's analysis is capable of contributing to our understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon in a number of respects. I look at Nietzsche's use of the controversial notions of slavery, understood both historically and in the context of modern society, to explore such central concerns of political anthropology as the nature and role of leadership, and the questions of development and inequality. The key focus of Nietzsche's examination concerns slavery as an enduring facet of human existence. He sees it becoming an important hallmark of the industrial culture as a barometer of modern society's physiological well-being, as well as acting as the repository for its externalities. Nietzsche's genealogical inquiry leads him to explore the psychological content of slavery and to conceptualise it in terms of human vulnerability, which increases susceptibility to exploitation. In these respects, Nietzsche's views resonate with pertinence today and deserve closer critical attention and scrutiny – something Nietzsche would undoubtedly welcome.

Keywords: Abolition, capitalism, industrial culture, psychology, slavery.

Whatever forms of state and society may arise, all will forever be only forms of slavery.
Nietzsche, NF-1881:16[23]¹

Introduction

It is difficult to underestimate the significance of Nietzsche's discussion of slavery and exploitation within the context of his critique of the industrial culture of modernity.² Huddleston notes that slavery remains a constant aspect of 'Nietzsche's thinking from his early essays ("The Greek State") to his final works of 1888' (Huddleston 2014: 146). Pursued throughout his *oeuvre*, this topology becomes a conduit for the critical examination of the pertinent questions of development and governance, as well as focusing on the problems of domination and inequality.

Reflecting on the issues within the context of modernity, Nietzsche asserts that capitalism's relationship with slavery does not come to an end with the abolition of slavery and that modern society, under the auspices of the industrial culture, engages in the 'sublime development of slavery'.³ Meanwhile, the slavery, which had been abolished, continues to weigh on the modern consciousness as an unpaid and, possibly unrepayable, debt.

By engaging with the challenging subject of slavery, Nietzsche develops a wide-ranging discussion concerning the 'conditions of existence' (*Existenzbedingungen*) – i.e. how we organise our lives and the ways in which we provide for our basic as well as more complex needs. Nietzsche's concerns aim to encompass more complex social outcomes, which also include the issues of psychological well-being and mental health as well as the much-ignored question of spiritual versus material welfare.

Concerning the semiosis of slavery

Nietzsche's discussion on the semiosis of slavery is an important starting point. It enables him to draw a critical distinction between exploitation, as a more fundamental aspect of existential constitution, and slavery as being more epiphenomenal. In Nietzsche's view, 'life itself is, at its mildest, exploitation' (BGE, §259).

The primary aspect of exploitation Nietzsche gleans from the thinkers of antiquity is not the unfair appropriation of the results of another's labour as its end.⁴ Rather, Nietzsche thinks of it as a modality of interaction between the qualitatively different and hierarchically ordered parts of the social whole, which allows not only for its preservation but also entails the potential for its enhancement, conceived in spiritual and cultural terms.

Slavery, to borrow from Galbraith, becomes a 'socially-modifying reference', which grants a degree of 'functional anonymity' to exploitation (Galbraith 2004: 15).⁵ Nietzsche frequently speaks of the 'metamorphoses of slavery', which at one time 'disguises itself under the cloak of religion' and later 'transfigures itself through morality' (GOA⁶ XV, §402).

On a linguistic level, Nietzsche concedes a fairly straightforward solution to the unsavoury sound of slavery. He accepts that the 'word "slave" sets off the panic button within the modern consciousness (GSt:§1) and suggests that slavery can be discussed 'under a more moderate name' in a manner similar to the times when the word slavery 'in no way seemed repugnant, let alone reprehensible' (NF-1871:10[1]).⁷

Nietzsche's own use of *Sklaverei* to discuss the slavery of the Greek antiquity, as well as the 'new world slavery', is both technically Platonic (i.e. the 'need for the one to speak of the many') as well as posing an etymological challenge to the modern sensibility. Nietzsche is well aware that slavery of the Greek antiquity did not exist as a unified, generic phenomenon. In this respect, use of the term *Sklaverei* to discuss the phenomenon of slavery stretching across time and different cultures, as if slavery remained somehow unchanged, itself exhibits a certain propensity to being exploited.

Concerning Nietzsche's definition of slavery

In *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery* (2017), Peter Hunt argues that, historically, the definition of slavery has suffered from the same 'imprecision and complexity' which 'affects many other key concepts and crafts that historians rightly consider crucial to their craft: capitalism, industrialism, the market economy, democracy, imperialism, law and others' (Hunt 2017: 20).

Nietzsche's own definition of slavery is an important entry point into the wider discussion of the subject. In *Human, All Too Human* (1878), he provides the following criteria: '... he how does not have two-thirds of his day to himself is a slave, let him be what he may otherwise: statesman, businessman, official, scholar' (HAH: *Tokens*, §283).

He goes on to suggest that 'true humanity demands that everyone be evaluated only in light of the condition' in which one 'discovers his higher self' and not in that of 'his working day unfreedom and servitude' (HAH: I§624). As such, this formulation is only superficially about time. Although, as Huddleston notes, Nietzsche construes slavery 'very broadly indeed', his definition is not intended to be of the 'catch-all' variety (Huddleston 2014: 146).

Rather, Nietzsche's statement hypothesises the inverse relationship between value-creation and the modern 'way of always keeping busy' (D: III, §203), which forms part of his diagnosis of the modern condition. It is reflected in the 'conscience of an industrious age' that does not permit us to 'bestow our best hours on art', which counts only as 'a recreational activity' to which we devote the 'remnants of our energy' (HAH: WS§170).

Our 'busyness' (*Geschäftigkeit*), which Nietzsche identifies with slavery, is symptomatic of a deeper pathology. It is, in a manner of speaking, a law of diminishing returns in that, today, it takes many more busy individuals, who are busier than ever before as well as from a much younger age than before, to create less and less of that which is valuable.⁸

The flip-side of busyness appears no less problematic. Nietzsche warns us that 'industriousness ... keeps silent about its dangers, its extreme dangerousness' (GS§21). He ponders the reasons for why the slave might be – or should be – kept busy in the first instance, as well as what happens to the slave should he be "liberated" and cease to be busy? Is there a felicitous exit from the state of the 'universal haste' in which modern society immerses itself (UM: SE§4-5)? This line of inquiry entails a prescient warning concerning the longer-term consequences of "keeping busy" on the individual and collective well-being, understood in terms of spiritual and mental health (NF-1873:32[44]).

Concerning the 'higher men' and 'the order of rank'

Nietzsche often reflects upon a given phenomenon, social or otherwise, by inferring from its opposite (NF-1886:5[61]). This approach helps him to reverse conceptual and value inversions (NF-1887: 10[111]). In this respect, in order to understand Nietzsche's 'slave', it is helpful to try and understand Nietzsche's 'higher man' as well as *visa versa*.

They appear similar in at least two respects. Most importantly, neither is 'defined by origins of any kind' (Klossowski 1969:158). Nietzsche suggests that the 'primal source is the same in all men' (NF-1871:12[1]). As such, his distinction does not derive from either of the (a) *race*⁹ (NF-1885:2[57]), (b) *citizenship, nationality or statehood* (NF-1885:37[8]), (c) *heredity* (NF-1887:9[45]) or the '*birth-right*'¹⁰, (d) *social status*, (e) *wealth*, (f) *gender*,¹¹ and (g) physical strength.¹² Instead, Nietzsche appears to have in mind a certain disposition, which although incorporated into the 'origins' and codified by them for a time, does not derive from the 'origins' and nor can it be sustained by them entirely (HAH:I§479).

In his concluding published work, *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche makes it clear that 'the word *Übermensch* designates a type of supreme well-being, in contrast to "modern" people, to "good" people, to Christians and other nihilists' (EH: *Good Books*, §1). Pierre Klossowski points out that Nietzsche's 'great human being' 'lives within the unexchangeable' and resists incorporation (Klossowski 1969: 158). Peter Sloterdijk reminds us of 'Nietzsche's decision thesis, namely that the history of humanity is yet to know real nobility' (Sloterdijk 2000: 57-8).

Secondly, the 'higher and the lower spheres of life' are inextricably connected and necessary for each other: 'every atom affects the whole of being' (NF-1888:14[79]) and the 'work of ants' is just as necessary as the 'astonishing labours' of genius 'for the harmonious endurance of all that is human' (HAH: II, VM§186). On multiple occasions, Nietzsche asserts that 'the ruler and his subjects are of the same kind' (NF-1885:40[21]) and the noble and the less noble 'belong together and are of one species' (HAH: I, §111). This cannot be understated, as the manner of their connection and the mode of their interactions reveal a great deal about the 'conditions of

existence' and the prevailing values within any given social arrangement.

For Nietzsche, relationship between the 'master' and the 'slave' is not binary. Rather, these signifiers denote the farthest points on a broad spectrum of sensibility and character. Each is at least partly shaped by that against which and in opposition to which it is defined, as well as exerting similar defining influence upon its opposite (NF-1886:5[61]). In this respect, it is important to note that Nietzsche's 'order of rank' is a highly nuanced concept, which he posits as a system of multiple *natural degrees*, as opposed to consisting of the unitary 'opposites', with which modernity prefers to operate on the basis that the 'opposites' are 'easier to comprehend' (NF-1887:9[107]). In one of the final letters to Georg Brandes, penned in December 1888, Nietzsche writes about the 'tremendously long ladder of ranking', which alone can serve as the basis of natural 'hierarchy between man and man' (BVN-1888:1170).

In *Human, All Too Human (1878-80)*, Nietzsche posits a detailed outline of the spectrum of qualitative individual differences, which he uses to articulate the subtle degrees separating the ordinary from the great:

We can distinguish five grades of traveller: those of the first and lowest grade are those who travel and, instead of seeing, are themselves seen – they are as though blind; next come those who actually see the world; the third experience something as a consequence of what they have seen; the fourth absorb into themselves what they have experienced and bear it away with them; lastly there are a few men of the highest energy who, after they have experienced and absorbed all they have seen, necessarily have to body it forth again out of themselves in works and actions as soon as they have returned home. It is like these five species of traveller that all men travel through the whole journey of life, the lowest purely passive, the highest those who transform into action and exhaust everything they experience. (HAH: vol.2, §228)¹³

An important aspect to appreciate about the above passage is that all 'five grades' of passenger travel on exactly the same train through the journey of life. It is primarily, albeit not exclusively, in this sense, Nietzsche tells us, that all of the passengers are all precisely equal and necessary for one another: they share in the mutual vulnerability.¹⁴

In a *Nachlass* note from 1887 titled *On the Ranking*, Nietzsche argues that the 'higher man' possesses a different, more acute and synthesizing sensibility, when compared to the 'typical man'. The latter is able to process a 'small corner' of reality but cannot cope well when 'the multiplicity of elements and the tension of opposites grows' (NF-1887:10[111]). To the 'calm of the strong soul, which moves slowly and displays an aversion to anything that is overhyped', Nietzsche juxtaposes the anxiety of the 'poor in spirit' (NF-1884:26[75]), who is unable to deal with 'an overwhelming abundance of what lives' (NF-1886:7[7]).

Equally, Nietzsche stresses the enormity of personal responsibility that lies squarely on the shoulders of the leaders in respect of their people: 'he who commands must carry the burden of all who obey', accepting the risk that the burden involved in commanding is always 'an experiment and a hazard' (SZ: *Self-Overcoming*). In *Human, All Too Human*, he argues that the task of producing 'supreme cultural values' at the same time means that 'the inner life' of the leaders is 'so much harder and more painful' (HAH:I,§480).

Nietzsche sees this aptitude for responsibility as an irrefutable consequence of the '*Die grossen Menschen*' being who they are. Greatness, first and foremost, 'means giving direction' (HAH:I,§521). Nietzsche's conjecture is that they do not have a choice in the matter: they are 'compelled' to it (NF-1887:11[286]). As such, 'the higher man' represents 'the height of collective

self-esteem’:

... it compels the individual to represent the pride of the whole ... he must speak and act with extreme respect for himself as he represents the community in person ... the responsibility for the whole draws and allows the individual a broad look, a stern and dreadful hand, a modesty and coldness and greatness of bearing, which he would not concede for his own sake. (NF-1887:11[286], #B-D)

Nietzsche’s analysis underscores the intricacy and the vital importance of the connection between the ‘higher and the lower spheres of life’, between the noble and the slave, the great and the ordinary, the genius and the mediocre. He insists that the nature of this connection is neither economic nor financial in the first instance. Instead, it is a conduit for meaning-making and value creation, as well as a complex network of affects and relations by means of which meaning and values are shared throughout the social whole and can be jointly owned, whilst the responsibilities can be apportioned according to aptitude.¹⁵

Developing this analysis further, Nietzsche argues that this connection between the ‘spheres of nobility and the slaves’ (GM: *Preface*, §4) becomes irreparably distorted under the auspices of the ‘industrial culture’ of modernity to a large extent because this connection, as does slavery, becomes construed in essentially reductionist economic and financial terms.

Nietzsche’s extensive discussion of the ‘order of rank’ provides an important entry point into his consideration of slavery as a psychological predicament. Through this concept, Nietzsche’s exploration of slavery also joins in the bigger conversation concerning the roots and causes of inequality.

Nietzsche is comprehensively criticized for his ‘untenable naturalism’ and for the failure to supply a credible ‘legitimizing rationale’ to ‘support his theory of politics’ (Ansell-Pearson 1994:41). Nonetheless, Nietzsche’s conjecture remains attention-worthy. He maintains that the underlying source of inequality is neither economic nor political. It is not an entirely manufactured outcome or an externally imposed constraint. Nor is it a consequence of specific institutional arrangements: ‘to be a public utility, a wheel, a function, for that one must be destined by nature: it is not society’ (TAC§57).

Consequently, Nietzsche’s ‘underprivileged’ are not just the politically or economically underprivileged. (NF-1886:5[71], §8, §14). Instead, Nietzsche thinks of the ‘underprivileged’ in the context of the distinction between the more ‘*whole* human beings’ and the ‘ordinary people’.¹⁶ In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), when discussing the ‘multitude’, he refers to them as ‘*unvollständigen Menschen*’ in the sense of a psychological incompleteness (BGE§257-258).

His argument problematises none other than the manner in which such underlying – psychological and physiological – differences between individuals become socialized and embedded into the structure of society, only to subsequently play out in the form of economic and political inequalities.¹⁷ Through the discussion of slavery, Nietzsche challenges the narrative on inequality as not being entirely truthful.

Concerning the physiology and psychology of slavery

Building on the logic that inequality is made manifest but does not arise exclusively from the social context, Nietzsche’s examination of slavery problematises it in terms of human vulnerability. Nietzsche argues that when the latter is stripped out from the *oikonomic* context of

‘mutual recognition of not causing harm’ (NF-1872:19[93]) and exposed in a depersonalised manner, it results in greater susceptibility to exploitation (GS§117). Nietzsche also problematises the slave as a vulnerability to be taken advantage of (HAH: WS§33).¹⁸ As Zarathustra notes, ‘he who cannot obey himself, will be commanded. That is the nature of living creatures’ (SZ: II, *Self-Overcoming*).

Genealogical aspects of Nietzsche’s inquiry into the root causes of slavery emphasise the latter as a particular physiological disposition, which translates into the psychological predicament and becomes ‘psychic suffering’ (GM: III, §16). Nietzsche emphasises the importance of getting the causation between physiology and psychology correctly: ‘If someone cannot cope with his ‘psychic suffering’, this does not stem from his psyche, to speak crudely; more probably from his stomach (GM: III, §16)’

Nietzsche’s claim is that beneath psychological distress, ‘certain weariness and heaviness’ and a ‘certain exhaustion’ are usually found, and that ‘the deep depression, the leaden fatigue and the black melancholy’ are rooted in ‘physiological feeling of obstruction and inhibition’ (Ibid.) The ‘true reason’ why the slave ‘feels ill’ is inevitably physiological, in Nietzsche’s assessment (GM: III, §15). However, ‘through lack of physiological knowledge’, the latter is dealt with as though ‘its “cause” and its cure can be sought and tested only on the psychological-moral level’ (GM: III, §16).

As such, our understanding of the psychology of slavery as that which ‘happens in the head’ requires ‘a physiological elucidation and interpretation, rather than a psychological one’ (GM: I, §17). Our error is to interpret the underlying physiological deficiency as a psychological one, thereby inverting cause and effect and creating the framework where physiological incompleteness can be exploited as psychological vulnerability.

Nietzsche tells us that individual’s valuations reveal something vital ‘about the structure of his soul’ (BGE: §268). His hypothesis is that the values of slave morality (e.g. humility, charity, pity, sympathy, kindness, equality) are not ‘good in themselves’ as much as they are ‘good for something’ (GM: *Supplementary*, I/96) – i.e. as ‘useful’ psychological ‘balms and ointments’ for a particular pathology (GM: III, §14). In this respect, Nietzsche finds the essence of slave morality to be thoroughly practical – it is to be found in its utility (BGE: §260). This utility and its value become the subjects of Nietzsche’s genealogical scrutiny.

Nietzsche acknowledges that the slave possesses psychological richness and complexity (GM: I, §6-7). However, these qualities remain unfulfilled and incomplete, as they cannot be synthesised physiologically (NF-1887:10[111]; GM: III, §13-18). Ken Gemes notes that the slave’s immediate problem is the inability ‘to integrate that complexity into an active whole’ (Gemes 2001: 358). This inability to make sense of either his volatile psychological predicament, or of the resentment, which results from it, forms the nexus of slave’s vulnerability (Wallace 2007:112-119).¹⁹

Nietzsche suggests that the slaves’ ‘discontent with their lot was not invented entirely by the priests’ or by their masters (GM: III, §18) and that, at some level, it represents the physiological ‘essence of their miserable condition’ (D: III, §206) resulting from insufficient worth or wholesomeness.²⁰ Deceitfulness serves to compensate for the incompleteness of one’s reality and manifests itself in ‘wishing not to see something that one does see; wishing not to see something as one sees it’ (TAC§55). It helps to complete the fragmentary nature of the slave’s sensibility: he has to borrow from the abstract in order to make his incomplete reality appear whole (GM: III, §18).²¹ In other words, a slave’s ‘physiological inhibition’ causes him to become

psychologically indebted. This is of critical significance in relation to the kind of valuations such individuals are capable of:

... he does not understand the reverse side of things as necessary: he combats the evils as if one could dispute them ... he does not want to accept the one goes hand in hand with the other and thus he wishes to obliterate: the typical character of a thing, a state, a time, a person, by endorsing only a part of their qualities and desiring to abolish all others. (NF-1887:10[111])

Looking deeper still, Nietzsche discerns a certain psychological propensity in the slave left to his own devices, to succumb to the ‘dull lethargy and the feeling of weakness’ growing from ‘his discontent, his aversion to himself’ (GM: III, §18). The herd instinct (*‘Heerden-Instinkt’*) as an inclination to aggregate in large numbers is another corollary of the same ‘pathological condition’ (GM: III, §18; NF-1882:3[1]). Increase in scale may represent a greater quantum of energy but it does not by itself amount to a different quality.

Nietzsche argues that, left to its own devices, the herd remains directionless – always at the risk of the ever-present threat of inner disintegration (GM: III, §15) – and cannot ‘endure itself’ in the absence of leadership (NF-1885:2[179]). Already in *Untimely Meditations* (1873), Nietzsche suggests that the majority, who are ‘only servants, assistants, instruments’ – unable to self-direct and give themselves meaning – are ‘never happy in being what they really are’ (UM: SE, §6).

As such, Nietzsche conceptualises slavery in the context of the fight against ‘the deep depression, the leaden fatigue and the black melancholy of the physiologically obstructed’ (GM: III, §15), including with the help of ‘a form of mechanical activity’. The latter is seen as not only providing temporary relief but as a necessary means to lift the slave ‘out of his most personal element in his discontent’ by ‘completely diverting the interest of the sufferer from the pain’ and providing him with a sense of certainty, ‘a certain encouragement, and indeed some discipline to forget himself’ (GM: III, §18).

Within these parameters, it becomes possible to see that Nietzsche’s discussion of slavery as an inquiry into the human physiological incompleteness and psychological vulnerability or lack thereof, understood both individually and collectively. It is conceptualised by Nietzsche in the sense of one’s ability to self-direct, to self-legislate and to give oneself values, or – in other words – the ability to create. Absence of such synthetic sensibility exposes psychological vulnerability, which is taken advantage of and which becomes imbedded into the social fabric of society.

Nietzsche contends that ‘the master of the weaker becomes stronger to the extent that the weaker cannot assert its degree of autonomy’ (NF-1885:36[18]). In this context, the questions of how and by whom this vulnerability-by-incompleteness is taken advantage of, Nietzsche argues, illuminate some of the more telling characteristics of the nature of a particular society, its driving forces and trajectory, as well as the value of its future.

Certain parallels can be drawn between Nietzsche’s discussion of slavery as a psychological disposition and the concept of a ‘strange loop’ in the sense of forming an inescapable predicament. By analogy to Escher’s famous lithograph of the *Drawing Hands*, Douglas Hofstadter defines the strange loop²² as:

an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive “upward” shifts turn

out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one's sense of departing ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop' (Hofstadter 2007:110).

Nietzsche argument suggests that the "Circe" of slave morality – 'the most vicious form of the will to lie' (NF-1888:23[3]) – completes a similarly 'strange loop'. This trajectory starts with re-positioning of the slave's discontent with oneself – rooted in the slave's physiological incompleteness – as though it were an injustice perpetrated from without – i.e. by external causes: 'I suffer: someone or other must be guilty' (GM: III, §15). The cause-effect relationship becomes inverted and a new lens of abstraction through which the world can be interpreted is created (NF-1872:19[204]).

The slave's physiological incompleteness becomes psychologised through the slave morality. The problem, as far as Nietzsche is concerned, is that slave morality, having started with false premises, ultimately falls short in delivering on its promises. It is unable to dispel, to break or to overcome the original predicament it sets out by exposing and denouncing. Instead, the slave morality completes the loop by normalising the inescapable and unalterable predicament by referencing it vis-à-vis itself (GM: III, §15). The secret of its success is that the strange loop reverts back to the subject who has undergone significant psychological reconfiguration 'at the freezing point of the will' (HAH: II, VM, §349), such that he can no longer sense this because now he dwells in the 'self-created world of opinions' growing out of 'specific moral values' (NF-1884:26[75]).²³ Zarathustra warns that 'even a prison' of slave morality will 'seem like bliss' to the 'restless people', who can 'enjoy their new security' in its inescapable nets (SZ: IV, *The Shadow*).

In the end, slave morality can do no more than to deliver the slave to a place where 'all are slaves and equal in slavery' (NF-1887:11[341]), so that he can make peace with that which he cannot escape. Nietzsche conjectures that 'no one talks more passionately about his rights than he who *in the depth of his soul* doubts whether he has any' (HAH: I, §597). The purpose of slave morality is not to transform the slave into the master (of himself) but rather to ease the pain of his discontent with himself and to make the slave embrace himself as he is – the slave.²⁴

In *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche tells us that 'culture is the child of each individual's ... dissatisfaction with himself' (UM: SE§6). The 'last man', however, according to Nietzsche, is he who is 'no longer able to despise himself' and consequently no longer knows of either love or creation (SZ: *Prologue*, §5). In a *Nachlass* note from 1881, Nietzsche asserts that the inability to feel dissatisfaction with oneself – the desire to accept oneself as one is with all the 'limitations of the "I" as though they were cause for celebration – is the hallmark of 'industrial and utilitarian culture' (NF-1881:11[50]).

Concerning the abolition of slavery

One of the places where this becomes evident is Nietzsche's discussion of the abolition of slavery. Nietzsche engages with the issue over an extended period of time.²⁵ In *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880), he makes clear his opposition to 'physical and spiritual enslavement' as forms of pestilence and barbarism (HAH: WS§275).

Increasingly, however, his writing on the subject reveals a degree of exasperation with the hypocrisy which surrounds this landmark development. Nietzsche challenges the abolition of

slavery on two grounds. The first is the issue of intellectual honesty, a charge he first levies against the Alexandrian culture's denials of the necessity of slavery:

The Alexandrian culture, to be able to exist permanently, requires a slave class, but with its optimistic view of life it denies the necessity of such a class, and consequently, when its beautifully seductive and tranquillising utterances about the 'dignity of man' and the 'dignity of labour' are no longer effective, it gradually drifts toward a dreadful destruction. (BT: #18)

Subsequently, in *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche adds to his argument by intimating that 'everyone who desires the abolition of slavery and abominates the idea of reducing people to this condition ... must at the same time realise that slaves live in every respect more happily and in greater security than the modern worker', whilst 'the work done by slaves is very little work compared with that done by the "worker"' (HAH: *The State*, §457).

Last but not least, in one of his final published works, *The Case of Wagner* (1888), Nietzsche elaborates his position further. He speaks about the abolition of slavery in terms of 'the instinctive uncleanliness in relation to oneself, and the unwillingness 'to gain clarity in relation to oneself'. These comments form the basis upon which Nietzsche chastises the German Kaiser: 'At this very moment the German Kaiser calls it his Christian duty to liberate the slaves in Africa' (CW:§3).

To Nietzsche, the triumph of value inversion would be to consider using the most enslaving instrument there is to liberate the enslaved. This position is consistent with Nietzsche's earlier note from the *Nachlass*, where he considers the abolition of slavery to belong in the same conceptual amalgam as Christianity, as 'the ostentatious words for something completely different (yes, the contrary!)' (NF-1887:11[135]).

As such, Nietzsche problematises the notion of the ideal (e.g. the abolition of slavery) by suggesting that the latter usually stands for the 'slandering and re-baptising' of old values (NF-1887:9[173]).²⁶ In the case of Christianity, as Ronald Osborn points out in *Humanism and the Death of God* (2017), 'the fact that Christianity was deeply complicit from the beginning in the projects of European colonialism, slavery and imperialism', gives potency to Nietzsche's comprehensive challenge of value-inversion, which appears to spearhead modernity's drive for liberation and progress (Osborn 2017:212-213).

Nietzsche's second and related objection to the abolition of slavery comes from the viewpoint of total cost that would be involved in overcoming slavery in more than just the name. Stated briefly, Nietzsche understands the total cost in the meaning of 'total accounting' as expressing 'the sum total of all costs and sacrifices' of achieving a stated objective (HAH: I, §475, §481).²⁷ Nietzsche's question to the proponents of the abolition of slavery can be formulated in the following way: has slavery been overcome with its abolition, or simply made more invisible and deeper embedded into the modern psyche?

Nietzsche's contention is that modern sensibility, more intolerant of the word 'slavery' than of its reality, is only informed by slavery as a recent historical phenomenon. The word 'slavery' is itself a relatively recent etymological phenomenon, dating from the Middle Ages. That slavery which has been abolished was, according to Nietzsche, nothing but the 'slavery of the barbarians' (NF-1869:3[44]). It was the slavery of the slaves, by the slaves and over the slaves and, as such, it could not have been anything but ugly, and reprehensible, because, and this is critical for Nietzsche, 'there were never slaves without masters' (NF-1881:16[23]).

Nietzsche suggests that the significance of the abolition of slavery does not derive primarily from the sense of a great victory over a heinous evil. Rather, the great tragedy and the direct evidence of our ethical degeneration is precisely that such slavery that was abolished had ever been allowed to come to pass in the first instance. As such, abolishing slavery has little to do with overcoming it. What is worse, in Nietzsche's view, is that the abolition only removes the real causes of this barbaric slavery further from the modern mind's eye.

Under the surface of a rousing but inevitably self-subsuming and self-referential 'battle cry' – 'the alleged tribute to human dignity' (NF-1887:9[173]) – the abolition of slavery also conceals the reality, which is neither disinterested nor benign, and nor does it represent substantive progress in relation to the underlying conditions of existence. Nietzsche warns us that 'these great words have value only in battle, as a standard: not as realities' (NF-1887:11[135]).

Abolition of slavery, in his view, is spearheaded by the 'will to one morality', which manifests itself in the drive to increasing uniformity serving the 'interest of profitability' (NF-1887:10[11]). Part of this process involves slavery being reconfigured into an economic phenomenon and being found wanting on that score. Paradoxically, the abolition of slavery has made it easier to exploit the "liberated" slaves, including by vastly increasing their numbers and thereby diluting the "unit cost" of producing a worker. As Adam Smith pointed out already in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), 'the work done by *freemen* comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves' (Smith 1852: 34). As a form of exploitation, slavery is found to be not economically viable. Hence, it is abolished.

Nietzsche points out one further aspect of intellectual dishonesty that presides over the abolition of slavery. He warns that, under the cover of the 'seductive and tranquilising utterances', unavoidably hides 'a very particular kind of man', who 'tries to gain mastery – more precisely, a very particular instinct' (NF-1887:9[173]). In the antecedent note, Nietzsche characterises this instinct as 'the dark instincts of those men of a democratic era who are dissatisfied, ambitious, disguised from themselves' (NF-1887:9[170]). He goes on to suggest that a particular 'lust for power' urges these men on and finds reflection in the agenda of the 'equality of men':

'Equality of men': what is hidden behind the tendency more and more to posit men *as equal* simply because they are men. 'Interestedness' in respect to common morality (the trick: making the great desires avarice and lust for power into patrons of virtue). (NF-1887:9[173])

In other words, Nietzsche seeks to establish a direct link between the economic logic of profit-making and the abolition of slavery: 'common morality is enforced only because it procures a benefit' (NF-1887:9[170]). Nietzsche notes that the liberated slaves 'should cease to be differentiated ... in their needs and demands – more clearly: that they are going to wither' (NF-1887:9[173]). He equates this with 'the tyranny ... or uniformity in favour of the rulers', which only alleges 'a tribute to "human dignity"' but never intends for it to materialise (Ibid.). This note from late *Nachlass* leaves little doubt in relation to whom Nietzsche considers as the prime beneficiaries of such a reconfiguration:

How far all kinds of businessmen and the avaricious, all those who have to grant and request credit, need to insist on sameness of character and sameness of value concepts:

world trade and exchange of all kinds enforces and, as it were, buys itself virtue. The same classes make use of immorality whenever that serves their purpose. (NF-1887:9[173])

As such, and beyond the echo of the ‘battle cry’, the abolition of slavery has little to do with some progressive moral epiphany and more with perpetuating more subtle forms of ‘impersonal and anonymous slavery’ (HAH: WS§288). Could it be, therefore, that through its abolition, slavery has simply been transitioned into a less tangible form and given a different name? In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche insists that this kind of ‘meaning-name’ inversion is, in fact, the case with the phenomenon in question, which has to be ‘adorned with such inoffensive names that they do not arouse the suspicion of even the most delicate hypocritical consciousness’ (GM: II, §7).

Turning briefly to the present day in order to illustrate Nietzsche’s point, Anti-Slavery’s International²⁸ warning resonates tellingly: ‘Modern slavery is inflicted on millions of people all over the world. But often it’s not called slavery, and many people don’t even know it exists’. Part of the reason for this is that, today, slavery is often referred to by other names. “Human trafficking” and “bonded labour” are arguably easier on the ear than slavery, even though in substance it is a ‘form of slavery’ and ‘the fastest growing means by which people are forced into slavery’, whereas bonded labour is ‘the most widespread yet least known form of modern slavery.’²⁹ The United Nations protocols define human trafficking as the

recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or ... of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum ... forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude ...³⁰

One characteristic, which many of the texts dealing with modern slavery highlight, is the issue of vulnerability. As Mary Cunneen, director of *Anti-Slavery International*, points out concerning the most likely slavery targets, ‘what all these people have in common is that they are vulnerable and suffer the worst forms of exploitation’ (van den Anker 2004: viii).

Inability to overcome slavery as a requirement and profiteering from it instead is a distinguishing feature of modernity, in Nietzsche’s view, and whilst ‘the glitter of general disinterestedness dazzles’, it also ‘conceals the knavery and harshness’ (HAH: I, §443). In other words, Nietzsche sees modern slavery as developing on the cross-roads of exploitation and the profit-logic, which becomes the motive force of the capitalist economy.³¹ As Holub aptly observes, ‘the ideology-laden platitudes of democracies only conceal the basic economic nexus of slavery’ (Holub 2018:144).

The increase in the scale of capitalist exploitation may have helped to take the “sting” out of the more naked forms of this exploitation, so that it has become more benign on the mind’s eye. Zarathustra warns us, however, that it is always ‘the invisible hands that torment and bend us the worst’ (SZ: I, *Tree on the Mountainside*).

In *The Half Has Never Been Told* (2014), Edward Baptist develops an empirically-based argument concerning the critical role of both slave labour and slave trade in the development of American capitalism.³² He deconstructs the accepted wisdom verified until recently by the ‘stamp

of academic research on the idea that slavery was separate from the great economic and social transformations of the Western world during the nineteenth century' (Baptist 2014: xix).

Baptist provides numerous examples of the unsavoury origins of modern global finance. One of them demonstrates how "commodified slaves", turned into the widely traded international financial securities and collateral in the 1820-1830s, were the real-life prototype of the modern financial products, such as mortgages (Baptist 2014: 248, 270). Elsewhere, in *Slavery's Capitalism* (2016), Beckert and Rockman find that, in parts of Louisiana, South Carolina, slave mortgages regularly 'generated more circulating capital in a given year than did the revenues from crops produced by slave labor' (Beckert and Rockman 2016: 17).³³

Slaves-based mortgages remained the popular and attractive long-term financial investment at the time when the concept and the practice of slavery were becoming increasingly politically and socially unacceptable either side of the Atlantic:

In effect, even as Britain was liberating the slaves of its Empire, a British bank could ... sell an investor a completely commodified slave: not a particular individual who could die or run away, but a bond that was the right to a one-slave-sized slice of pie made from the income of thousands of slaves. (Baptist 2014: 248)

Baptist argues persuasively that capitalist economy and capitalism, as the social order in America as well as in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, rose on the back of slave trade, slave labour and slave finance. Echoing Nietzsche's own conclusions, he also points out that slavery tends to become increasingly brutal in its forms when it becomes pursued for profit.

Prominent American sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, in his famous book *Darkwater: The Twentieth Century Completion of Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1920), which chronicles the horrors of black slavery in America in the early part of the 20th century, problematises the tragedy of slavery the following probing question:

We ask, and perhaps there is no answer, how far may the captain of the world's industry do his deeds despite the grinding tragedy of its doing? How far may men fight for the beginning of comfort, out beyond the horrid shadow of poverty, at the cost of starving other and what the world calls lesser men? (Du Bois 1920:91)

Nietzsche tells us slavery has not been overcome with abolition. Rather, its exterior appearance has changed. In a certain respect, Nietzsche's argument echoes that delivered by the US District Judge, Edward Coke Billings, in the famous 1873 address on the 'The struggle between civilisation of slavery and that of freedom':

You have destroyed the visible temple of a gross heathen deity; but the heathen idolatry has survived the destruction of its palpable shrine. You have abolished slavery; but you have not destroyed the civilization—the moral and social ideas, born of slavery; nor can you destroy them save by the added ameliorations and incisions ...³⁴

Fast forwarding to today once again, it is worth noting that Anti-Slavery International repeats Nietzsche's conclusions: 'Slavery did not end with abolition in the 19th century. Instead, it changed its forms and continues to harm people in every country in the world.'³⁵ Zarathustra's prescient words are worth keeping in mind: 'Do you call yourself free? I want to hear your *ruling idea* and not that you have escaped from a yoke' (SZ: I, *Creator*).

Concerning capitalism and modern slavery

Capitalism actively reconfigures the concept of slavery. As is cogently argued in the examination of the ‘diverse and heterogenous’ roles of slavery in the *New Frontiers of Slavery* (2016), redesigning slavery has undoubtedly been ‘an integral aspect of the “great transformation”, modernity, and capitalist development’ (Tomich 2016: 2). In *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche notes that ‘as at all times, so now too, men are divided into the slaves and the free’ (HAH: *Tokens*, §283,132).

What does Nietzsche suggest happens to slavery in modernity? Part of his concern is with the travails of an “old foe” – *principium individuationis*, which he tracks from Socrates and through its various reincarnations to modernity. Nietzsche tells us ‘the very isolated individual of the modern age is made too weak and bound to fall into servitude’ (NF-1869:3[44]).

Capitalism advances by teaching such an individual ‘to see boredom as though lit up by a higher charm’ so that the ‘mechanical form of existence’ would appear ‘as the highest, most venerable form of existence’ (NF-1887:10[11]). Nietzsche surmises that the modern individual ‘regards himself as free’ largely because ‘he no longer *perceives* the weight of the chains’ (HAH: WS§10). At the same time, however, the real motive forces, which calibrate the moral imperatives of the industrial culture so as to ensure self-advancement – namely those of ‘profitability, amusement and expediency’ – remain hidden from view (NF-1887:10[11]).

A critical point Nietzsche makes is that commercial society now engages the vocabulary of equality, dignity and freedom in order to foster the ‘sublime development of slavery’ (NF-1885:2[179]), which, beneath the platitudes of the liberatory vernacular (HAH: I, §443), also involves taking full advantage of the slave’s psychological vulnerability, which is amplified by moulding and controlling subjectivity of the labourer in such a way that ‘labour becomes indistinguishable from “work on the self” ‘ (Lazzarato 2011: 33). In this context, Nietzsche problematises modern slavery as becoming primarily an ‘impersonal enslavement’ (D: *Book III*, §206).

Modern slavery becomes less visible at least in two respects. Slavery’s physical manifestations become outsourced beyond the perimeter of the western world wherefrom slavery continues to be a logical choice of the capitalist system as providing a necessary cost-effective boost to the capitalist economy, so that the latter can continue to thrive.³⁶ Within the perimeter, however, slavery does not perish either: it becomes increasingly internalised into the multiplicity of drives, which become diffused throughout the fabric of the consumer society.

Focus on the enslaving propensities of industrial culture is central to Nietzsche’s critique. On one hand, Nietzsche correctly anticipates the emergence of the consumer society that would become enslaved by the incessant ‘satisfaction of its own needs’ (Klossowski 1969: 158). As Nietzsche’s argument goes, ‘the greedy exploitation of every minute brings forth ... the self-seeking drives of the soul’, leaving ‘all men’ feeling ‘in themselves only the self-seeking worm’ (UM: *SE*, §4). Yet, at the same time, this ‘worm’ – emblematic of the ‘commercial culture’ – is of the kind that remains ‘eternally hungry’ and dissatisfied ‘no matter how much it devours’, in the sense, which Nietzsche first invokes in *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT: §23).

Helping to embed this ‘commercial culture’ structurally is the comprehensive political drive for ‘equalization ... in the guise of democratization practiced by industrial society’ (Klossowski 1969: 165). One concomitant effect of the equalisation drive, which entitles

everyone to ‘believe they have the right to any problem’ (NF-1884:25[298]) is an unavoidable increase in the levels of ‘anxiety’ (HAH: *WS*, §170) and ‘agitatedness’ (Ibid.: vol.1, §285). The ‘extreme movement’ of modern civilisation ‘in terms of speed and means’ (NF-1888:14[182]) helps to deliver the agitated and anxious individuals into the therapeutic lap of the consumerist cycle, thereby reinforcing the “vicious circle”, which ‘implies, for Nietzsche, a reduction of the human being’ (Klossowski 1969: 165-67). The latter, as we can infer from Nietzsche’s argument, occurs in proportion to the ever-expanding (i.e. inflationary) periphery of the industrial culture.

These two intertwined and mutually reinforcing trends – consumption and agitated anxiety – promote the ‘universally enslaving economy’ of industrial culture (Klossowski 1969:165). Nietzsche argues that such social arrangement is attainable only at a very high, albeit for a long time invisible, cost. Behind the symptoms discussed above, Nietzsche hypothesizes a far deeper process of ‘physiological decline’, the final destination of which would be to ‘turn the Earth into a hospital’ (NF-1886:4[7]). I contend that Nietzsche’s warning concerns the impending mental health crisis (NF-1888:14[182]), which is also aptly captured by Klossowski:

Nietzsche has the irrefutable premonition: the total effacement of differences in the satisfaction of needs and the homogenization of the habits of feeling and thinking will have, as its effect, a moral and affecting numbing ... the human being will no longer feel itself; nor its substance, nor its power – even though it will henceforth be capable of exploiting other planets (Klossowski 1969: 165).

As a result, modern individuals become enslaved through the absence of formal slavery. They find it difficult to carry on with their daily lives, which entail an inscrutable contradiction of living enslaved – what Klossowski refers to as ‘congenital servitude’ (Ibid.,157) – although, superficially, they do not consider themselves to be slaves.

An inference that can be drawn from Nietzsche’s multipronged analysis of modern slavery, therefore, appears to be that the ‘atomistic individuals’ (NF-1882:4[83]) – no matter how free, equal and dignified – should encounter increasing difficulty in regarding their existential condition (HAH: *WS*§209). Already in *The Greek State* (1872), Nietzsche warned of a potentially ‘enormous social problem’: ‘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’ (GSt: §6). This, Nietzsche intimates, is liable to become a point of colossal psychological stress and a mental fracture from which the tremendous anxiety of the modern age would rise to the point where ‘the burden of living becomes too heavy’ (HAH: II, *VM*§401).

Nietzsche’s analysis also suggests that capitalism reconfigures the slave by disrupting his psychological habitat so as to expand the commercial reach of slavery and to sweep far greater numbers, including the former masters, into the fold of the slave morality, which in its secularized form gains ascendancy within the precepts of industrial culture, which include both the discourse on democracy as well as the doctrines of economic liberalism.³⁷ This is partly the reason why Nietzsche insists that ‘the slave-like character of morality ... continually generates new forms of similar slavery’ (NF-1884:25[163]).

Perhaps the crucial reason why Nietzsche finds modern slavery as disagreeable as he does is the degradation of the ‘*Die grossen Menschen*’ into Carlyle’s ‘**Captains of Industry**’ and Spencer’s ‘**regulative, ruling and employing classes**’.³⁸ Whilst the latter may well declare as their ‘first ambition’ to be ‘a noble master, among noble Workers’ to which the desire ‘to be a rich

Master' is explicitly subordinated³⁹, in Nietzsche's view, they fail to become commensurate with the exacting demands of the '*Die grossen Menschen*'.

Nietzsche finds the 'luminaries of industry' fundamentally deficient and 'faking leadership'. He likens them to the 'blood sucking dogs, speculating on misery of every kind', whilst advancing their self-interest (GS: §40). Elsewhere, he describes them as 'only slaves, who lie ... about their slave-like nature and work' (NF-1881:16[23]).

In *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche tells us that 'the decadents need the lie as it is one of the conditions of their preservation' (EH: *BT*, §2) but with perilous consequences for the rest: 'all the problems of politics, of social organisation, and of education have been falsified through and through because one mistook the most harmful men for great men' (EH: *Clever*, §10).

When the 'leaders of humanity' (NF-1888:23[3]) become decadent, 'exoteric' in their outlook (BGE:§30) and 'intestinal' (UM: SE§4; *RWB*§6) in their modus operandi, while those 'in the lower spheres of the world', who are of the 'weaker soul' and 'lower life force' (BGE§30) are left to their insufficient own devices – the entirety of the social whole suffers a loss of value and degenerates whilst impersonal enslavement flourishes: 'Material prosperity, the comfort that satisfies the senses, is now desired, and all the world wants it above all else. Consequently, it will meet a spiritual slavery that never before existed (NF-1881:11[294], o.t.).'

The 'conditions of existence', which embody and reflect these values make it neigh impossible for the great individuals to emerge. In this respect, Nietzsche notes that 'the degeneration of the rulers has created the greatest madness in history' (NF-1884:25[344]). In the words of Zarathustra:

There is no harder misfortune in all human destiny than when the powerful of the earth are not also the first men. Then everything becomes false and awry and monstrous. ... then the value of the rabble rises higher and higher and at last the rabble-virtue says: Behold, I alone am virtue! (SZ: IV, Kings)

This paves the way for the proliferation of meaningless and wasteful slavery, which engulfs all social classes and every sphere of life. This, Nietzsche's argument suggests, makes slave morality not only a potent economic force but also 'the greatest danger' (GM: I,§12), as it all but confirms us moderns as 'the last man, and the slave' (EH: *Destiny*, §5).

Nietzsche foresees the eventual 'mechanisation of mankind' as a function of the 'total economic administration of the earth'. He argues, however, that absent the worthy – the 'What For and Whither To – the 'maximum point of exploitation' will always correspond to the 'minimal forces', 'minimal values' and the most dwarfish of individuals, no matter how free they may imagine themselves. Hence, Nietzsche's stark conjecture that 'the theory of freedom of will is an invention of the ruling classes' (HAH: WS§9).

Unable to supply value and meaning, the modern 'captains of industry' are more likely to perpetuate slavery so long as it continues to assist in advancing their interests.⁴⁰ Perpetuation of slavery, however, is not consequence free. The latter may accrue out of sight for a time and up to a point where incremental improvements in material well-being can no longer provide a *bona fide* substitute for spiritual and mental well-being (HAH: II, *VM*, §317). Nietzsche posits this as a central concern in relation to the industrial culture of modernity:

It is clear that what I am fighting is *economic optimism*: the idea that everyone's profit necessarily increases with the growing costs to everyone. It seems to me that the reverse

is the case: the costs to everyone add up to a total loss: man becomes less – so that one no longer knows what this tremendous process was actually for. A ‘What for’, a new ‘What for’ – that is what mankind needs. (NF-1887:10[17])

Nietzsche’s analysis of modern slavery can be read as a cautionary tale about the high price the invisible costs – known as ‘externalities’ in economic speak – can and do exact: ‘we pay the highest price for any one-sided preference’ (HAH:II, VM, §186). One such ‘one-sided preference’ is manifest in the universally enslaving propensities of the industrial culture, which defines progress in terms of indefinite economic growth under the mantra of profit maximisation. Nietzsche’s reflections on slavery problematise the comprehensive hollowing-out of human spirit and the diminution of the individual’s worth as the true cost we incur on such developmental trajectory, which to him is the most regrettable squandering of energy and resources. He notes that the energy ‘by which the mills of the modern world were driven’ comes first and, and only then, and a long way after, the truth’ (HAH: II, VM§226), which exposes ‘progress’ as the ‘retrograde movement’ (Ibid., §178) and a ‘secret path of decline’ (BGE: §10).

In a related sense, slavery, according to Nietzsche, could never make purely economic sense, which becomes its conceptual designation under the auspices of industrial culture.⁴¹ Nietzsche, therefore, urges us to bring back into the picture the hidden costs and contingent liabilities of the industrial culture. He insists that they must be brought onto the ‘balance sheet of life’ (NF-1875:5[188]) in order for us to be in a position to have a meaningful and honest discussion about the state of society, its developmental trajectory and its future prospects. In this context, slavery becomes important in the sense of acting as a repository where the invisible costs accrue and crystallise overtime.

Concluding remarks

Nietzsche contends that, throughout human history, slavery has never disappeared. He is confident that slavery will remain rooted in existence long after ‘our social order will slowly melt away’ (HAH: I, §443). In the *Nachlass* note from 1881, Nietzsche insists that ‘slavery is universally present, although no one wishes to admit it’ (NF-1881:11[221]). The persistent denials and misconstruals of slavery have only had the effect of fortifying it and incorporating it deeper into the social fabric.

This process of incorporation entails, in Nietzsche’s view, a comburent danger in so far as modern slavery acts as a mirror in which modern consciousness and conscience reflect. It brings up the following acute predicament:

The entire past of the old culture was erected upon force, slavery, deception, error; but we, the heirs and inheritors of all these past things cannot decree our own abolition and may not wish away a single part of them (HAH: I, §452).

Referring to the modern state in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), Nietzsche alleges that ‘whatever it has it has stolen’ (SZ: *New Idol*). According to Nietzsche, this presents a twofold issue of evaluating such history and deciding how to move on from it.

In *Slavery’s Capitalism* (2016), Beckert and Rockman elaborate on the problematic aspects of the dilemma posited by Nietzsche:

A scholarly revolution over the past two decades ... has recognized slavery as the foundational American institution, organizing the nation's politics, legal structures, and cultural practices with remarkable power to determine the life chances of those moving through society as black or white. An outpouring of scholarship ... leaves little doubt that the new United States was a "slaveholding republic." In comparison, only a small segment of recent scholarship has grappled with the economic impact of slavery. Only in the past several years has scholarship on finance, accounting, management, and technology allowed us to understand American economic development as "slavery's capitalism." And only now is there enough momentum to leverage some basic facts ... into a fundamental rethinking of American history itself. (Beckert and Rockman 2016: 2-3)

Beckert and Rockman's assessment resonates with a number of earlier notable studies. In a 2004 article in the Harvard *BlackLetter* Law Journal titled 'Documenting the Costs of Slavery', Professor Feagin, developing on Randall Robinson's *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000), argues that, in similar fashion to the way Europe benefited from slavery, 'today ... prosperity, long life expectancies and high standard of living of white Americans are significantly rooted in centuries of exploitation and impoverishment of African Americans and other Americans of Colour' (Feagin 2004: 50). Analysing various and wide-ranging estimates of the potential financial cost of nearly 250 years of institutionalised slavery and nearly 400 years of racial oppression, which he equates with 'theft and ill-gotten gains' in the US, Feagin concludes:

... Even by rough calculations, the sum total of the worth of all the black labor stolen by whites through the means of legal slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racial discrimination is truly staggering – many trillions of dollars. The worth of all that labor, taking into account lost interest over time and putting it in today's dollars, is perhaps in the range of \$5 [trillion] to \$24 trillion. (Feagin 2004: 55)

This rough estimate is extraordinary in the following two senses. In the first instance, the upper end of the indicated range is, coincidentally perhaps, roughly equivalent to the level of US National Debt today and would double the latter, were it to be treated as debt.⁴² This unpaid debt detracts, according to Nietzsche's logic, from the reality and the worth of society's achievements since neither value, nor worth can ultimately be stolen or created from theft.

The second is that Nietzsche's verdict on Feagin's recommendations that, consistent with the notion of the 'ever expanding social justice', considerable reparations ought to be made in compensation (Ibid.: 81), financial compensation alone would not extinguish the debt, which is not financial in nature.

The real extent of the dependency on slavery, both present and historic, is not yet fully acknowledged.⁴³ This problem might be compounded by the failure to have built anything truly worthy on its foundations, which could justify slavery as a historical legacy as well as helping to find a plausible way forward. Nietzsche's criteria for constructing the worthy future is 'to do something that would make the thought of life even a hundred times more appealing' (GS: §278). Equally, 'only he who constructs the future has a right to judge the past' (UM: UDHL§6): 'When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it. (Ibid.)

Slavery in this respect is a reflection of the deep-seated guilt associated with brutality under early capitalism, which remains an unpaid debt in the modern conscience. The predicament it creates is that the modern society, which has come to abhor exploitation and

slavery, remains deeply complicit in them.⁴⁴ Nietzsche suggests that in such predicament, one's enjoyment of the present would be accompanied by a 'profound weariness' as he gazes into the future for he knows 'in advance that his posterity will suffer from the past as he does' (HAH: WS§249). Such weight, liable to increase over time, Nietzsche warns us, is well capable of petrifying the modern conscience:

Man ... braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a, dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown (UM: UDHL§1).

This invisible burden, however, also contains a radicalising and self-destructive nexus (BGE§242). Left to its own devices, it may lead to a scenario where the ineradicable logic of exploitation would turn against its most ardent deniers, who would become its new target: 'equality of rights could all too easily be changed into inequality and in violating rights' (BGE: §212).⁴⁵

In this context, Klossowski suggests that Nietzsche's analysis anticipated the critical juncture where 'the thought of the *Vicious Circle* will become ... intolerable' (Klossowski 1969:160). As Gianni Vattimo perceptively observes in *Nihilism and Emancipation*:

If we do not want – as indeed we cannot, except at the risk of terrible wars of extinction – to give way to the temptation of resurgent fundamentalisms grounded in race, religion, or even the defence of individual national cultures against invasion by 'foreigners', we will have to imagine a humanity with at least some of the characteristics of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (Vattimo 2003: *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 55).

Nietzsche urges us to think about 'the configuration of *society* without melancholy' (NF-1871:10[1]). This requires reflecting on the forms of subordination that would be commensurate with the task of 'the 'preservation of life and the enhancement of its value' (TAC: §7) in a manner that would promise and guarantee 'life a future' (TAC: §58).

At the same time, however, Nietzsche's analysis posits a significant challenge: it is only when 'the slave-like valuations', which over the centuries have presided over the most abhorrent forms of the 'slaves' slavery', have been overturned that a different meaning and understanding of slavery might become possible (NF-1884:25[174], [211]). Without finding new modalities of subordination, which would entail a wholesale revaluation of values, 'a host of the most astonishing operations will no longer be capable of achievement and the world will be the poorer' (HAH: I, §441). Nietzsche insists that in order to gain mastery over slavery and to exploit it, to get to the position wherefrom exploitation, as an irreducible existential attribute, could itself be exploited, directed and bent to one's will, it is imperative to be inserted into the very thick of it (NF-1881:11[221]).

These considerations merit inviting Nietzsche into the current debate on slavery as part of the broader conversation on development and inequality. Nietzsche's discussion raises probing questions, which challenge our perceptions of slavery and urge us to stop trivialising the thorny and uncomfortable issues out of the conversation. I have argued that Nietzsche's critique, considered through the prism of political anthropology, compels us not to be so blasé as to believe that exploitation and slavery are relics of the past, or that we live in a classless society.

Instead, Nietzsche challenges us to recognise the impact which slavery in different forms – both past and present – continues to make on the world. Nietzsche’s own scrutiny of slavery translates into a pressing call for reconsidering our conditions of existence with the view to finding commensurate ways of living with each other in the world. Growing empirical evidence attests to the prescient nature of Nietzsche’s analysis and justifies its closer critical consideration.

Notes

¹ Nietzsche’s Digital Archive (<http://www.nietzschesource.org/>) is used to source unpublished notes from the Nietzsche’s notebooks assembled in the *Nachlass*. Notes in the *Nachlass* are organized according to the year, number of the notebook and a number of the notebook entry, e.g. NF-1881(year): 16(notebook number) [23] (note number).

² My research suggests that Nietzsche coined the expression ‘*industriellen Cultur*’ in *The Gay Science (Book I, §40)*.

³ NF-1885:2[13], [179].

⁴ Nietzsche’s understanding of exploitation is informed by the thinkers of antiquity, including Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, who did not regard exploitation objectionable. Cicero, in particular, whose work including the political dimensions of ‘the Roman concept of culture’ Nietzsche knew in detail and lectured on (BVN-1874:345/CvG), had distinguished between the exploitation of human and natural resources and linked both to the origins of property and wealth (*De Officiis*, um.44.v.u.Z).

⁵ To illustrate this point, cf. Galbraith’s discussion of the elusive nature of capitalism in *The Economics of Innocent Fraud* (2004): ‘When capitalism, the historic reference, ceased to be acceptable, the system was renamed. The new term was benign but without meaning. The word capitalism is still heard but not often from acute and articulate defenders of the system. In the reputable expression of economists, business spokesmen, careful political orators and some journalists, it is now ‘the Market System’ (Galbraith 2004: 5-8).

⁶ GOA is the abbreviation for the *Nietzsches Werke* (*Grossoktavausgabe*).

⁷ Cf. an engaging discussion on this point in Andrew Huddleston’s *Nietzsche on Slavery and Human Dignity* (*Journal of History of Philosophy*, vol. 52, #1, 2014, p.147) and Jeffrey Church’s (2015) *Nietzsche’s Early Perfectionism*, pp.253-254.

⁸ Cf. Nietzsche’s discussion on the spirit of universal ‘haste and hurry’ in *Untimely Meditations* (UM: SE, #6). Nietzsche problematizes the system of education under capitalism as the cynical ‘labour of the greatest possible common utility’, which instead of allowing individuals to mature, is focused only on getting them ‘ready for employment as soon as possible’: ‘They must labour in the factories of general knowledge before they are mature, indeed so that they shall not become mature – for this would be a luxury which would deprive the ‘labour market’ of a great deal of its workforce’ (UM: UDH, #7). Cf. also HAH: I, *Tokens*, §285.

⁹ We should recognise the *racial aspect* of Nietzsche’s polemic as important and meriting a separate examination. However, I contend, that consideration of race was not the driving or the determining factor in Nietzsche’s views on exploitation and slavery (cf. GS§377).

¹⁰ Nietzsche’s ‘noble man’ is ‘*der vornehme Mensch*’ (BGE§260), as someone who ‘stands in front’, rather than ‘*der Edelmann*’ (EH: *Wise*, §3), who is simply a ‘nobleman’ by birth. Also see Nietzsche’s discussion in HAH: vol.1, §456.

¹¹ ‘The perfect woman is a higher type of human than the perfect man, and also something much more rare (HAH, Section 7, §377). In an early note from the *Nachlass*, Nietzsche says that ‘the woman as mother prevails and determines the degree and the phenomena of culture: in the same way as the woman is destined to supplement the disordered state’ (NF-1870: 7[122]).

¹² BGE§257.

¹³ Notably, Nietzsche’s classification of the spectrum of sensibility bears a close connection to Aristotle’s distinction concerning the ‘five virtues of thought’. Developing on Socratic ideas, Aristotle considers five virtues of thought: *phronesis*, *epistêmê* (scientific knowledge), *technê* (craft and art), *nous* (intuitive and inward reason, intelligence, the ‘eye of the soul’ or the ‘third eye’) and *sophia* (philosophic wisdom) (NE: VI, §3).

¹⁴ In the *Nachlass* note from 1872, Nietzsche references it as mutual recognition of not causing harm

(‘gegenseitige Anerkennung sich nicht zu schädigen’ (NF-1872: 19[93]).

¹⁵ In this respect, the classical Greek discourse on *Oikonomia* and on the *Oikodespotes*, as we find it in Xenophon’s ‘*Oeconomicus*’ as well as in Aristotle’s ‘*Nicomachean Ethics*’ and in ‘*Politics*’, are useful if somewhat understudied contextualising influences on Nietzsche’s views on the issues of politics and economy, as well informing his ideas concerning the ‘higher individual’.

¹⁶ Cf. also NF-1887: 10[111].

¹⁷ This position differentiates Nietzsche’s analysis away from both the Marxist and the liberal democratic traditions of thought and presents a point of great angst for both as it neither allows Nietzsche’s incorporation, nor enables his conclusive dismissal.

¹⁸ Cf. Nietzsche’s discussion in HAH (vol.1, *HMS*, §93).

¹⁹ R. Jay Wallace (2007) *Ressentiment, Value and Vindication: Making Sense of Nietzsche’s Slave Revolt* in Leiter and Sinhababu, eds. (2007), *Nietzsche and Morality*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 110-138.

²⁰ In the word *κακός* as in *δειλός* (the plebeian as opposed to the *ἀγαθός*) cowardice is underlined: this perhaps gives a hint in which direction one has to seek the etymological origin of the multiply interpretable *ἀγαθός*’ (GM: I, §5).

²¹ In a *Nachlass* note from 1872, Nietzsche claims that ‘The liar uses words in order to make the unreal appear as real, i.e. he misuses the firm foundation (NF-1872:19[230]). In a further note from 1884, Nietzsche suggests that ‘the herding instinct comes to words in words’ (NF-1884:27[15]). Cf. also NF-1884: 26[75] - §3: ‘The world of opinions - how deep value-estimation goes into things is so far overlooked: how we are stuck in a self-created world, and in all our sensory perceptions there are still moral values’ and NF-1887: 10[111]. Cf. also Nietzsche’s discussion in #2 of *TLEMS* concerning ‘the intellect – the master of deception’ as coming to the aid of a ‘needy man’ (EN:*TLEMS*, #2).

²² Cf. Hofstadter’s discussion in ‘*Gödel, Escher, Bach*’ (1979) and in ‘*I am a strange loop*’ (2007).

²³ Cf. also Nietzsche’s discussion in NF-1887:10[77]: ‘Democracy is the clearance of that boarded door of Christianity: a kind of “return to nature”, after only by an extreme anti-nature the opposite valuation could be overcome.’

²⁴ This conjecture is masterfully dramatized in Bulgakov’s satirical novel *Heart of a Dog* (1925), where a distressed stray dog, named *Sbarik*, undergoes a miraculous, if temporary, transfiguration into a human, made possible by the supposed advances in medical science.

²⁵ Between 1878 and 1887, Nietzsche writes five *Nachlass* notes on the subject as well as addressing it in his published works, including *The Case of Wagner* (1888).

²⁶ ‘It is always wrong to expect a “progress” from an ideal: the victory of the ideal has always been a retrograde movement’ (NF-1887, 11 [135])’

²⁷ Peter Sedgwick appropriately suggests that Nietzsche’s ‘total cost’ perspective can be understood in terms of ‘a general economic principle: social life is not static, it includes elements that either expand or contract, and every gain (expansion) by someone somewhere is possible only in virtue of there being an equal or greater than equal loss (contraction) on the part of someone or something somewhere else’ (Sedgwick 2007: 151; cf. p.107). For some of Nietzsche’s own clearest formulations of the total cost approach, cf. D: *Book III*, §206 and the *Nachlass* note NF-1887: 10[17].

²⁸ *Antislavery* is one of the oldest international human rights organisations, established in 1839. According to its estimates, over 40 million people live in slavery today. Source: <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/>.

²⁹ Source: <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/>.

³⁰ United Nations Report on Human Rights and Human Trafficking (Fact Sheet No. 36), p.2. Source: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS36_en.pdf.

³¹ Cf. An informative overview of and discussion on this issue can be found in ‘Did Slavery Make Economic Sense’ (The Economist, *Economic History*, 27 September 2013).

³² Baptist’s argument echoes the thesis advanced earlier by Eric Williams in his seminal work *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), where he argues against the entrenched view that linked the ideas of economic and moral progress, the latter evidenced by the abolition of slavery, as the main engines of capitalistic development.

³³ Cf. Bonnie Martin’s detailed examination of the slave mortgaging practices in ‘Neighbor-to-Neighbor Capitalism’ (Beckert and Rockman (eds.) *Slavery’s Capitalism*, 2016, Ch. IV, pp.107-122).

³⁴ The struggle between the civilization of slavery and that of freedom, recently and now going on in Louisiana. An address delivered by Edward C. Billings, esq., of New Orleans, at Hatfield, Mass., Oct. 20,

1873, Library of Congress Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/resource/rbaapc.02701>.

35 Source: <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/>.

³⁶ Cf. van den Anker 2004: vii-viii and Domar 1970: 18-21.

³⁷ Cf. Nietzsche's discussion in BGE: *NHM*, §202; BT: *ASC*, §4; NF-1884:25[345] and NF-1885:2[13].

³⁸ Cf. Thomas Carlyle (1843), Past and Present, Thomas Carlyle's Collected Works, Vol. XIII (Source: <https://archive.org/stream/pastandpresenth26159gut/26159.txt>) and Herbert Spencer (1873), The Study of Sociology (Source: https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/spencer-the-study-of-sociology-1873#Spencer_0623_244).

³⁹ Cf. Thomas Carlyle (1843), Past and Present, Book IV, Ch. IV, p.333, Source: <https://archive.org/stream/pastandpresenth26159gut/26159.txt>.

⁴⁰ One of Nietzsche's most scornful inferences in this regard is, perhaps, found in the *Nachlass* note from 1881. Addressing it to the 'self-owned' (*Ihr Selbsteigenen*) autocrats (*Ihr Selbstherrlich*) of the future, Nietzsche characterises those men, who 'think themselves to be high above' everyone else in the modern society – 'princes, merchants, officials, farmers and military men' (*Fürsten, Kaufleute, Beamte, Ackerbauer, Soldaten*) – as 'only slaves, who do not work for themselves as eternal necessity would have it' (NF-1881:16[23]). Nietzsche contends, rather presciently, that only in 'a future age one would be able to see this presently indiscernible spectacle' for what it really is when 'the illusions' by means of which these men of the moment 'lie to themselves about their slave-like work' can no longer confer legitimacy upon the false hierarchy upon which the existing social order, including its ruling classes, is premised (Ibid.).

⁴¹ In this context, cf. UNESCO's 'Against Slavery: The On-Going Struggle': 'Struggles against slavery and all forms of servitude in the world have had one thing in common from the sixteenth century until today, namely a set of arguments that were often similar from one period to another. They were based on the more or less clearly expressed feeling that there was a need for respect for human rights in the face of a scandalous submission to economic interests.

⁴² Source: <https://www.usdebtclock.org/>.

⁴³ The *University of Cambridge* recently launched an inquiry into its own possible historical links with slavery (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-48097051>). The *University of Glasgow* has taken it a step further in deciding 'to pay back profits from slave trade' received in the 18th and 19th century (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-49435041>).

⁴⁴ Cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/02/modern-slavery-daily-life-exploitation-goods-servicesfor> for one example of such complicity.

⁴⁵ Cf. Nietzsche's discussion in *Human, All Too Human* on the 'decline and death of the State', as the 'consequence of the democratic conception of the state' (HAH: *State*, §472), as well as in 'Possessors and Revolutionaries' (HAH: II, VM, §304).

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