

The Greek State

By Friedrich Nietzsche

Preface to an unwritten book (1871)

We moderns have an advantage over the Greeks in two ideas, which are given as it were as a compensation to a world behaving thoroughly slavishly and yet at the same time anxiously eschewing the word “slave”: we talk of the “dignity of man” and of the “dignity of labor.” Everybody worries in order miserably to perpetuate a miserable existence; this awful need compels man to consuming labor; he (or, more exactly, the human intellect) seduced by the “Will” now occasionally marvels at labor as something dignified. However, in order that labor might have a claim on titles of honor, it would be necessary above all, that Existence itself, to which labor after all is only a painful means, should have more dignity and value than it appears to have had, up to the present, to serious philosophies and religions. What else may we find in the labor-need of all the millions but the impulse to exist at any price, the same all-powerful impulse by which stunted plants stretch their roots through earthless rocks!

Out of this awful struggle for existence only individuals can emerge, and they are at once occupied with the noble phantoms of artistic culture, lest they should arrive at practical pessimism, which Nature abhors as her exact opposite. In the modern world, which, compared with the Greek, usually produces only abnormalities and centaurs, in which the individual, like that fabulous creature in the beginning of the Horatian Art of Poetry, is jumbled together out of pieces, here in the modern world in one and the same man the greed of the struggle for existence and the need for art show themselves at the same time: out of this unnatural amalgamation has originated the dilemma, to excuse and to consecrate that first greed before this need for art. Therefore we believe in the “dignity of man” and the “dignity of labor.”

The Greeks did not require such conceptual hallucinations, for among them the idea that labor is a disgrace is expressed with startling frankness; and another piece of wisdom, more hidden and less articulate, but everywhere alive, added that the human thing also was an ignominious and piteous nothing and the “dream of a shadow.” Labor is a disgrace, because existence has no value in itself; but even though this very existence in the alluring embellishment of artistic illusions shines forth and really seems to have a value in itself, yet that proposition is still valid that labor is a disgraced disgrace indeed by the fact that it is impossible for man, fighting for the continuance of bare existence, to become an artist. In modern times it is not the art-needing man but the slave who determines the general conceptions, the slave who according to his nature must give deceptive names to all conditions in order to be able to live. Such phantoms as the dignity of man, the dignity of labor, are the needy products of slavery hiding itself from itself. Woeful time, in which the slave requires such conceptions, in which he is incited to think about and beyond himself! Cursed seducers, who have destroyed the slave’s state of innocence by the fruit of the tree of knowledge! Now the slave must vainly scrape through from one day to another with transparent lies recognizable to every one of deeper insight, such as the alleged “equal rights of all” or the so-called “fundamental rights of man,” of man as such, or the “dignity of labor”: Indeed he is not to understand at what stage and at what height dignity can first be mentioned namely, at the point, where the individual goes wholly beyond himself and no longer has to work and to produce in order to preserve his individual existence.

And even on this height of "labor," the Greek at times is overcome by a feeling that looks like shame. In one place Plutarch with earlier Greek instinct says that no nobly born youth on beholding the Zeus in Pisa would have the desire to become himself a Phidias, or on seeing the Hera in Argos, to become himself a Polyklet; and just as little would he wish to be Anacreon, Philetas or Archilochus, however much he might revel in their poetry. To the Greek the work of the artist falls just as much under the undignified conception of labor as any ignoble craft. But if the compelling force of the artistic impulse operates in him, then he must produce and submit himself to that need of labor. And as a father admires the beauty and the gift of his child but thinks of the act of procreation with shamefaced dislike, so it was with the Greek. The joyful astonishment at the beautiful has not blinded him as to its origin which appeared to him, like all "Becoming" in nature, to be a powerful necessity, a forcing of itself into existence. That feeling by which the process of procreation is considered as something shamefacedly to be hidden, although by it man serves a higher purpose than his individual preservation, the same feeling veiled also the origin of the great works of art, in spite of the fact that through them a higher form of existence is inaugurated, just as through that other act comes a new generation. The feeling of shame seems therefore to occur where man is merely a tool of manifestations of will infinitely greater than he is permitted to consider himself in the isolated shape of the individual.

Now we have the general idea to which are to be subordinated the feelings which the Greek had with regard to labor and slavery. Both were considered by them as a necessary disgrace, of which one feels ashamed, as a disgrace and as a necessity at the same time. In this feeling of shame is hidden the unconscious discernment that the real aim needs those conditional factors, but that in that need lies the fearful and beast-of-prey-like quality of the Sphinx Nature, who in the glorification of the artistically free culture-life so beautifully stretches forth her virgin-body, Culture, which is chiefly a real need for art, rests upon a terrible basis: the latter however makes itself known in the twilight sensation of shame. In order that there may be a broad, deep, and fruitful soil for the development of art, the enormous majority must, in the service of a minority be slavishly subjected to life's struggle, to a greater degree than their own wants necessitate. At their cost, through the surplus of their labor, that privileged class is to be relieved from the struggle for existence, in order to create and to satisfy a new world of want.

Accordingly we must accept this cruel sounding truth that slavery is of the essence of Culture; a truth of course, which leaves no doubt as to the absolute value of Existence. This truth is the vulture that gnaws at the liver of the Promethean promoter of Culture. The misery of toiling men must still increase in order to make the production of the world of art possible to a small number of Olympian men. Here is to be found the source of that secret wrath nourished by Communists and Socialists of all times, and also by their feebler descendants, the white race of the "Liberals," not only against the arts, but also against classical antiquity. If Culture really rested upon the will of a people, if here inexorable powers did not rule, powers which are law and barrier to the individual, then the contempt for Culture, the glorification of a "poorness in spirit," the iconoclastic annihilation of artistic claims would be more than an insurrection of the suppressed masses against drone-like individuals; it would be the cry of compassion tearing down the walls of Culture; the desire for justice, for the equalization of suffering, would swamp all other ideas. In fact here and there sometimes an exuberant degree of compassion has for a short time opened all the flood gates of Culture-life; a rainbow of compassionate love and of peace appeared with the first radiant rise of Christianity and under it was born Christianity's most beautiful fruit, the gospel according to St. John. But there are also instances to show that powerful religions for long periods petrify a given degree of Culture, and cut off with inexorable sickle everything that still grows on strongly and luxuriantly. For it is not to be forgotten that the same cruelty, which we found in the essence of every Culture, lies also in the essence of every powerful religion and in general in the essence of power, which is always evil; so that we shall understand it just as well, when a Culture is shattering, with a cry for liberty or at least

justice, a too highly piled bulwark of religious claims. That which in this “sorry scheme” of things will live (i.e., must live), is at the bottom of its nature a reflex of the primal-pain and primal-contradiction, and must therefore strike our eyes—“an organ fashioned for this world and earth”—as an insatiable greed for existence and an eternal self-contradiction, within the form of time, therefore as Becoming. Every moment devours the preceding one, every birth is the death of innumerable beings; begetting, living, murdering, all is one. Therefore we may compare this grand Culture with a blood-stained victor, who in his triumphal procession carries the defeated along as slaves chained to his chariot, slaves whom a beneficent power has so blinded that, almost crushed by the wheels of the chariot, they nevertheless still exclaim: “Dignity of labor!” “Dignity of man!” The voluptuous Cleopatra-Culture throws ever again the most priceless pearls, the tears of compassion for the misery of slaves, into her golden goblet. Out of the emasculation of modern man has been born the enormous social distress of the present time, not out of the true and deep commiseration for that misery; and if it should be true that the Greeks perished through their slavery then another fact is much more certain, that we shall perish through the lack of slavery. Slavery did not appear in any way objectionable, much less abominable, either to early Christianity or to the Germanic race. What an uplifting effect on us has the contemplation of the medieval bondman, with his legal and moral relations—relations that were inwardly strong and tender—towards the man of higher rank, with the profound fencing-in of his narrow existence—how uplifting!—and how reproachful!

He who cannot reflect upon the position of affairs in Society without melancholy, who has learnt to conceive of it as the continual painful birth of those privileged Culture-men, in whose service everything else must be devoured—he will no longer be deceived by that false glamour, which the moderns have spread over the origin and meaning of the State. For what can the State mean to us, if not the means by which that social-process described just now is to be fused and to be guaranteed in its unimpeded continuance? Be the sociable instinct in individual man as strong as it may, it is only the iron clamp of the State that constrains the large masses upon one another in such a fashion that a chemical decomposition of Society, with its pyramid-like superstructure, is bound to take place. Whence however originates this sudden power of the State, whose aim lies much beyond the insight and beyond the egoism of the individual? How did the slave, the blind mole of Culture, originate? The Greeks in their instinct relating to the law of nations have betrayed it to us, in an instinct, which even in the ripest fullness of their civilization and humanity never ceased to utter as out of a brazen mouth such words as: “to the victor belongs the vanquished, with wife and child, life and property. Power gives the first right, and there is no right, which at bottom is not presumption, usurpation, violence.”

Here again we see with what pitiless inflexibility Nature, in order to arrive at Society, forges for herself the cruel tool of the State—namely, that conqueror with the iron hand, who is nothing else than the objectification of the instinct indicated. By the indefinable greatness and power of such conquerors the spectator feels, that they are only the means of an intention manifesting itself through them and yet hiding itself from them. The weaker forces attach themselves to them with such mysterious speed, and transform themselves so wonderfully, in the sudden swelling of that violent avalanche, under the charm of that creative kernel, into an affinity hitherto not existing, that it seems as if a magic will were emanating from them.

Now when we see how little the vanquished trouble themselves after a short time about the horrible origin of the State, so that history informs us of no class of events worse than the origins of those sudden, violent, bloody and, at least in one point, inexplicable usurpations: when hearts involuntarily go out towards the magic of the growing State with the presentiment of an invisible deep purpose, where the calculating intellect is enabled to see an addition of forces only; when now the State is even contemplated with fervor as the goal and ultimate aim of the sacrifices and duties of the individual: then out of all that speaks the

enormous necessity of the State, without which Nature might not succeed in coming, through Society, to her deliverance in semblance, in the mirror of the genius. What discernments does the instinctive pleasure in the State not overcome! One would indeed feel inclined to think that a man who looks into the origin of the State will henceforth seek his salvation at an awful distance from it; and where can one not see the monuments of its origin-devastated lands, destroyed cities, brutalized men, devouring hatred of nations! The State, of ignominiously low birth, for the majority of men a continually flowing source of hardship, at frequently recurring periods the consuming torch of mankind—and yet a word, at which we forget ourselves, a battle cry, which has filled men with enthusiasm for innumerable really heroic deeds, perhaps the highest and most venerable object for the blind and egoistic multitude which only in the tremendous moments of State-life has the strange expression of greatness on its face!

We have, however, to consider the Greeks, with regard to the unique sun-height of their art, as the “political men in themselves,” and certainly history knows of no second instance of such an awful unchaining of the political passion, such an unconditional immolation of all other interests in the service of this State-instinct; at the best one might distinguish the men of the Renaissance in Italy with a similar title for like reasons and by way of comparison. So overloaded is that passion among the Greeks that it begins ever anew to rage against itself and to strike its teeth into its own flesh. This bloody jealousy of city against city, of party against party, this murderous greed of those little wars, the tiger-like triumph over the corpse of the slain enemy, in short, the incessant renewal of those Trojan scenes of struggle and horror, in the spectacle of which, as a genuine Hellene, Homer stands before us absorbed with delight—whither does this naive barbarism of the Greek State point? What is its excuse before the tribunal of eternal justice? Proud and calm, the State steps before this tribunal and by the hand it leads the flower of blossoming womanhood: Greek society. For this Helena the State waged those wars—and what grey-bearded judge could here condemn?

Under this mysterious connection which we here divine between State and art, political greed and artistic creation, battlefield and work of art, we understand by the State, as already remarked, only the cramp-iron, which compels the Social process; whereas without the State, in the natural *bellum omnium contra omnes* Society cannot strike root at all on a larger scale and beyond the reach of the family. Now, after States have been established almost everywhere, that bent of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* concentrates itself from time to time into a terrible gathering of war-clouds and discharges itself as it were in rare but so much the more violent shocks and lightning flashes. But in consequence of the effect of that *bellum*—an effect which is turned inwards and compressed—Society is given time during the intervals to germinate and burst into leaf, in order, as soon as warmer days come, to let the shining blossoms of genius sprout forth.

In face of the political world of the Hellenes, I will not hide those phenomena of the present in which I believe I discern dangerous atrophies of the political sphere equally critical for art and society. If there should exist men, who as it were through birth are placed outside the national- and State-instincts, who consequently have to esteem the State only in so far as they conceive that it coincides with their own interest, then such men will necessarily imagine as the ultimate political aim the most undisturbed collateral existence of great political communities possible, in which they might be permitted to pursue their own purposes without restriction. With this idea in their heads they will promote that policy which will offer the greatest security to these purposes; whereas it is unthinkable, that they, against their intentions, guided perhaps by an unconscious instinct, should sacrifice themselves for the State-tendency, unthinkable because they lack that very instinct. All other citizens of the State are in the dark about what Nature intends with her State-instinct within them, and they follow blindly; only those who stand outside this instinct know what they want from the State and what the State is to grant them. Therefore it is almost unavoidable that such men should gain great influence in the State because they are allowed to

consider it as a means, whereas all the others under the sway of those unconscious purposes of the State are themselves only means for the fulfilment of the State-purpose. In order now to attain, through the medium of the State the highest furtherance of their selfish aims, it is above all necessary, that the State be wholly freed from those awfully incalculable war-convulsions so that it may be used rationally—and thereby they strive with all their might for a condition of things in which war is an impossibility. For that purpose the thing to do is first to curtail and to enfeeble the political separatisms and factions and through the establishment of large equipoised State-bodies and the mutual safeguarding of them to make the successful result of an aggressive war and consequently war itself the greatest improbability; as on the other hand they will endeavor to wrest the question of war and peace from the decision of individual lords, in order to be able rather to appeal to the egoism of the masses or their representatives; for which purpose they again need slowly to dissolve the monarchic instincts of the nations. This purpose they attain best through the most general promulgation of the liberal optimistic view of the world, which has its roots in the doctrines of French Rationalism and the French Revolution, i.e., in a wholly un-Germanic, genuinely neo-Latin, shallow, and unmetaphysical philosophy. I cannot help seeing in the prevailing international movements of the present day, and the simultaneous promulgation of universal suffrage, the effects of the fear of war above everything else, yea I behold behind these movements, those truly international homeless money-hermits, as the really alarmed, who, with their natural lack of the State-instinct, have learnt to abuse politics as a means of the Exchange, and State and Society as an apparatus for their own enrichment. Against the deviation of the State tendency into a money-tendency, to be feared from this side, the only remedy is war and once again war, in the emotions of which this at least becomes obvious, that the State is not founded upon the fear of the war-demon, as a protective institution for egoistic individuals, but in love to fatherland and prince, it produces an ethical impulse, indicative of a much higher destiny. If I therefore designate as a dangerous and characteristic sign of the present political situation the application of revolutionary thought in the service of a selfish State-less money-aristocracy, if at the same time I conceive of the enormous dissemination of liberal optimism as the result of modern financial affairs fallen into strange hands, and if I imagine all evils of social conditions together with the necessary decay of the arts to have either germinated from that root or grown together with it, one will have to pardon my occasionally chanting a Paeon on war. Horribly clangs its silvery bow; and although it comes along like the night, war is nevertheless Apollo, the true divinity for consecrating and purifying the State. First of all, however, as is said in the beginning of *The Iliad*, he lets fly his arrow on the mules and dogs. Then he strikes the men themselves, and everywhere pyres break into flames. Be it then pronounced that war is just as much a necessity for the State as the slave is for society, and who can avoid this verdict if he honestly asks himself about the causes of the never-equalled Greek art-perfection?

He who contemplates war and its uniformed possibility, the soldiers profession, with respect to the hitherto described nature of the State, must arrive at the conviction, that through war and in the profession of arms is placed before our eyes an image, or even perhaps the prototype of the State. Here we see as the most general effect of the war-tendency, an immediate decomposition and division of the chaotic mass into military castes, out of which rises, pyramid shaped, on an exceedingly broad base of slaves, the edifice of the “martial society.” The unconscious purpose of the whole movement constrains every individual under its yoke, and produces also in heterogeneous natures as it were a chemical transformation of their qualities until they are brought into affinity with that purpose. In the highest castes one perceives already a little more of what in this internal process is involved at the bottom, namely the creation of the military genius—with whom we have become acquainted as the original founder of states. In the case of many States, as, for example, in the Lycurgian constitution of Sparta, one can distinctly perceive the impress of that fundamental idea of the State, that of the creation of the military genius. If we now imagine

the military primal State in its greatest activity, at its proper “labor,” and if we fix our glance upon the whole technique of war, we cannot avoid correcting our notions picked up from everywhere, as to the “dignity of man” and the “dignity of labor” by the question, whether the idea of dignity is applicable also to that labor, which has as its purpose the destruction of the “dignified” man, as well as to the man who is entrusted with that “dignified labor,” or whether in this warlike task of the State those mutually contradictory ideas do not neutralize one another. I should like to think the warlike man to be a means of the military genius and his labor again only a tool in the hands of that same genius; and not to him, as absolute man and non-genius, but to him as a means of the genius—whose pleasure also can be to choose his tool’s destruction as a mere pawn sacrificed on the strategist’s chessboard—is due a degree of dignity, of that dignity namely, to have been deemed worthy of being a means of the genius. But what is shown here in a single instance is valid in the most general sense; every human being, with his total activity, only has dignity in so far as he is a tool of the genius, consciously or unconsciously; from this we may immediately deduce the ethical conclusion, that “man in himself,” the absolute man possesses neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties; only as a wholly determined being serving unconscious purposes can man excuse his existence.

Plato’s perfect State is according to these considerations certainly something still greater than even the warm-blooded among his admirers believe, not to mention the smiling mien of superiority with which our “historically” educated refuse such a fruit of antiquity. The proper aim of the State, the Olympian existence and ever-renewed procreation and preparation of the genius—compared with which all other things are only tools, expedients and factors towards realization—is here discovered with a poetic intuition and painted with firmness. Plato saw through the awfully devastated Herma of the then-existing State-life and perceived even then something divine in its interior. He believed that one might be able to take out this divine image and that the grim and barbarically distorted outside and shell did not belong to the essence of the State: the whole fervor and sublimity of his political passion threw itself upon this belief, upon that desire—and in the flames of this fire he perished. That in his perfect State he did not place at the head the genius in its general meaning, but only the genius of wisdom and of knowledge, that he altogether excluded the inspired artist from his State, that was a rigid consequence of the Socratic judgment on art, which Plato, struggling against himself, had made his own. This more external, almost incidental gap must not prevent our recognizing in the total conception of the Platonic State the wonderfully great hieroglyph of a profound and eternally to be interpreted esoteric doctrine of the connection between State and Genius. What we believed we could divine of this cryptograph we have said in this preface.

* * *

[Source: Unknown.]