NIETZSCHE AND THE POLITICS OF HATE: HOW ARE THEY MANIFEST IN THE U.S. TODAY?

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ABSTRACT

The premise of the paper is that there are elements in our society suffering from feelings of ressentiment that cannot be overcome. The feelings stem from a sense that society has failed them and that the Promise of the American Dream has not been fulfilled. Their mentality is powered by a need for revenge, not by a rational belief that different policies will better serve the country. Insofar as an element of society is fueled by this irrational need for revenge, this segment does not seek the good of the country but rather the destruction of the self-defined “enemy” who has betrayed them.

I first explore the concept of ressentiment as characterized by Nietzsche in his historical and philosophical world view – a world view that denies any transcendent purpose or meaning to human existence, a world of indifference and necessity into which we are thrust for a short time. The sufferers from ressentiment cannot accept the reality of an indifferent world that promises them nothing and owes them nothing. They have a personalist world view that privileges the importance of the individual; they seek answers on an individual level to the question of “Why me?” and finding none, suffer incurable persistent feelings of hatred toward an other group whom they blame for their feelings of impotence. The term
ressentiment encompasses a sense of powerlessness that is alleviated by feelings of hate, envy, and spite.

I then look at the question of how this sense of ressentiment came to be in this country; i.e., what it is in the American experience and our self-created myths that result in such feelings of envy and hatred. I discuss the myth of American exceptionalism, the story of a New Adam in a New World as it evolved from the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who came to build a “City on a Hill,” and from the planters of Virginia who thought that they were creating a country of independent, yeoman farmers, to show how a sense of expectation and betrayal can derive from our American mythology. I give examples of the continuing role that ressentiment has played in the American experience and discuss manifestations of ressentiment among a segment of our population today. I regretfully acknowledge that we cannot overcome the feelings of hate, blame and betrayal manifest in a part of the American population. Our country cannot return to a mythical past.

I start the exploration of this paper with a discussion of Nietzsche’s historical, etymological and philosophical views to appropriately describe the concept of ressentiment in his framework. I end it with a discussion of Nietzsche’s sense of self, responsibility and overcoming in the world that he posited.
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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the concept of *ressentiment* as discussed by Nietzsche to determine how it is manifest in the United States currently. Those elements of society suffering from feelings of *ressentiment* cannot be satisfied. Their mentality is powered by a need for revenge, not by a rational belief that different policies will better serve the country. Insofar as a group in the society is fueled by this irrational need for revenge, this segment does not seek the good of the country but rather the destruction of the self-defined “enemy.” The paper looks at the question of how this sense of *ressentiment* came to be in our society; i.e., what it is in the American experience and our self-created myths that result in such feelings of envy and hatred.

The Politics of *ressentiment* is defined in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as the moralizing revenge of the powerless. The term was first used in a political sense by Nietzsche.

Out of... powerlessness... hate [by the people] grows into something enormous and uncanny, into something most spiritual and most poisonous.... the spirit of revenge.... The miserable alone are the good; the poor, powerless, lowly alone are the good... the only blessed in God....

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of beings denied the true reaction, that of the deed, who recover their losses only through an imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says “no” to an “outside,” to a “different,” to a “not-self”: and *this* no is its

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creative deed. This reversal of the value-establishing glance, this necessary direction toward the outside instead of back onto oneself belongs to the very nature of ressentiment; in order to come into being, slave-morality always needs an opposite and external world; it needs, psychologically speaking external stimuli in order to be able to act at all, its action is, from the ground up, reaction.²

Max Scheler defines ressentiment as a subject group (group 1) suffering incurable persistent feelings of hatred toward another group (group 2), based on their own feelings of envy and the need for revenge. “The incurable impotencies or weaknesses that the subject group constantly suffer from... generate... always negative emotive attitudes and lead to false moral judgments made on other people... accompanied by hidden feelings of self-disvalue over against others... feeling[s] of resentment [at the] unattainability of positive values that others represent.” The fable of the Fox and the Grapes illustrates the concept. “When the fox cannot reach the grapes he devalues them, declares them sour. The fox devalues the grapes out of a sense of physical impotence and finds them unworthy. The powerlessness makes him detract and diminish the value of the sweetness of the grapes he calls sour.”³ If the fox hated the grapes over a long period of time, declared them evil, determined to grow cherries (which he really did not like very much anyway) because they were better than grapes, and remained consumed by his derision of the ‘sour’ grapes on the evil tree, the fox, indeed, would manifest ressentiment.

² Ibid., 19.

Paul Krugman in our current world calls it “The Politics of Spite.” He notes that when the news that the International Olympic Committee rejected Chicago’s bid to be host of the 2016 Summer Games was made public:

Cheers erupted at the headquarters of the conservative Weekly Standard, according to a blog post by a member of the magazine’s staff, with the headline “Obama loses! Obama loses!” Rush Limbaugh declared himself “gleeful.” “World Rejects Obama,” gloated the Drudge Report. And so on....

The episode illustrated an essential truth about the state of American politics: at this point, the guiding principle of one of our nation’s two great political parties is spite pure and simple. If Republicans think something might be good for the president, they’re against it — whether or not it’s good for America.4

Chapter 1 of this paper provides an overview of Nietzsche’s philosophy and a discussion of how the concept of ressentiment fits into his framework. It reviews Nietzsche’s main themes to show how the human condition if not properly understood can result in wrongful, twisted expectations by some elements of society that find expression in feelings of ressentiment. For Nietzsche, those who suffer from ressentiment suffer from a “slave” morality in which the Christian precepts of piety, compassion, humility are defensive expressions of the weak against the strong.

Nietzsche does not present his themes systematically in a straight-forward manner; they are not discretely addressed in different works. They are described metaphorically and threaded throughout his work. Nietzsche attempts to “create an artwork out of himself, a

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literary character who is a philosopher.” His work is the most significant expression of his will to power. And, therefore, the presentation of Nietzsche’s themes in this paper necessarily does not do them justice. In abstracting them from the surrounding text, they appear more cohesive, stable, formulated, defined than Nietzsche meant. Rather than a call to action and transcendence, his themes come across as a somewhat cohesive, somewhat contradictory world view to be parsed rather than exulted in. But the need for clarity with regard to the role of *ressentiment* in the body of Nietzsche’s work and the limitations of time and space cause me to pin the ideas down in a too limited, pedestrian fashion. These themes include: The death of God, the concept of necessity, perspectivism, the will to power, the eternal recurrence, the *overman* or *Ubermensch*, and, of course, the role of *Ressentiment*.

- **The Death of God:** There is no purpose provided by an outside source. No view of the meaning of life is scientifically demonstrable; whatever view you take is your CHOICE. You choose it. The world of nature in which we exist is indifferent to the human species; there is no theistic world to which we can appeal.

- **The Concept of Necessity:** The world is a world of nature, totally indifferent to human desire, aspirations, suffering. Nature has no end beyond itself, no teleological goal. The individual must position himself in such a world without blame, and say YES to life, to see as beautiful that which is.

- **Perspectivism:** In this indifferent world, our understanding of possibilities is limited by the time and place in which we exist. We do not make the world or nature. We can express our energy, our will to power, in a limited world at a particular time and place.

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• The Will to Power: It is the will to life itself. All life seeks expansion of power; i.e., “to grow, spread, seize, become predominant... in all events a will to power is operating.... [a] living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength — life itself is will to power”6 The will to power says YES to reality – to what must be; it is an affirmation of reality as it is.

• Eternal Recurrence: One should crave nothing more fervently than the eternal recurrence, the absolute repetition of one’s reality, one’s experience exactly as it is. For what exists, must occur. The present moment as it is now is the all. One should make life pleasurable; live joyfully, fully affirmatively and creatively without hope that goes beyond the present moment. The metaphor of “Eternal recurrence” is tied to the concept of the overman.

• Overman or Ubermensch: The overman strives to overcome, to accept fate, to exercise his will to power to make beautiful what is outside of his control. The overman “create[s] meaning and value in a world from which all transcendent supports have fallen away, ... give[s] unique shape to one’s immediate inclinations, drives, and passions; interpret[s], prune[s], and enhance[s] according to a unifying sensibility, a ruling instinct, that brings everything into a whole that satisfies the non-conceptual, aesthetic norm of what fits, what belongs, what is appropriate.”7

• Ressentiment: Ressentiment arises from a personalist world view that privileges the importance of the individual and seeks answers on an individual level to the question of “Why me?” It does not acknowledge the reality of a world of indifference and necessity into which we are thrust. The term encompasses a sense of powerlessness that is alleviated by feelings of hate, envy, spite. It premises the “other” as all-powerful and sees oneself as “powerless to express these feelings actively against the person or social stratum evoking them... [there is] a continual re-experiencing of this impotent hostility.”8

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Once the understanding of the nature of ressentiment is clarified, its utility for a certain segment of society described, and its destructive nature – for both its adherents and the society as a whole – illuminated, we will turn to the basis for its manifestation in the United States.

The paper proposes that the inevitable, and increasingly apparent, disparity between the American myth and the reality of our world has left a part of our population trapped in feelings that Nietzsche found to be crucial to the “slave mentality” that he characterized as ressentiment and deplored in his philosophical writings. The world of the United States is changing in ways that some elements of our society find alien and intolerable. The extravagant hatred is based on the violation of the old myth of the American dream by the realities of our current world.

But economic, educational, and social disparity exist in all societies – some more extreme than others. Anger and feelings of vengefulness are not particular to the United States today. What is singular is the form that it takes here as a consequence of the particular American historical experience and the myths we tell ourselves. The claim of this paper is that the demonization of the present administration play into an existing strain in United States history and American mythology that can be evoked to characterize the opposition as “other,” Un-American, and evil.

Chapter 2 describes the American myths that have sustained us as a country and motivated national behavior. These myths include:
• The New Adam: The hero in our scenario is “an individual emancipated from history... untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritance of family and race... standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero... was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. [He was] fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him.9

The Garden of Eden: The Garden of Eden is transported to the new world. We have escaped from the corruption of Europe, from the bonds of history into an experiential innocence, a new Adam.

• Natural Rights and Limited Government: The Founding Fathers found their justification for the concept of Progress and the self-made man in the Enlightenment theory of the Rights of Man and the writings of John Locke; i.e., that individuals have inherent rights by nature, that they form governments to protest those rights, and that the sole purpose of government is to safeguard the individual and his/her inherent inalienable rights. The concept gained further legitimacy with the westward expansion of the country, seemingly limitless land and opportunity.

• The Chosen People: Puritans saw themselves as a "new Israel," a Chosen people, repeating the biblical story of Exodus by establishing a "City on the Hill" in a "new Canaan" where a purer form of Christianity could develop and which would serve as a moral and religious beacon for the rest of the world. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, set forth the idea of American exceptionalism, the concept of “The City on a Hill,” in the sermon he gave on board ship in 1630, before he even arrived in the new world. His leadership embodied an interdependence of

• God’s Grace in this World: God will provide in this world as well as in the next. God will manifest his grace in this world, for here “Christ [had] brought a promise of heaven in one hand and prosperity in the other.”10

• God’s Favor to the United States: The concept of God changed over the first half century of the United States, from the Calvinist God of the Puritans who “had


predestined only a chosen elect for salvation and condemned everyone else to Hell,“ to a kinder, gentler God and a theology in which “all men – but also all women – were... capable of attaining salvation – [by] the acceptance of Christ as a personal savior.” Jonathan Edwards, preaching and writing in the Christian revival movement of the 1740s, the Great Awakening, called for repentance and devotion to God. He looked to the new world as the fulfillment of God’s promise. “The work that is now begun in New England is, as I have shown, eminently glorious, and if it should go on and prevail, would make New England a kind of heaven upon earth,” (versus a heaven after earth).

Ronald Reagan, in his farewell speech, gave the most fulsome expression of God’s benevolence and favor to our special country.

And that’s about all I have to say tonight. Except for one thing. The past few days when I’ve been at that window upstairs, I’ve thought a bit of the "shining city upon a hill." The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we’d call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.

I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still.14


12 Ibid., 391.


How did the sentiments that underlie the optimistic self-created legends of America morph into feelings of spite and anger? Chapter 3 discusses the ressentiment that developed in our society from elements of the myth belied. The changes that increasing industrialization and capital development brought about in the first half of the 19th century were not congruent with our sense of ourselves. The resulting feelings of ressentiment, feelings of helplessness that needed an external target to blame, were, in part, responsible for the exclusionary practices toward immigrant groups. The sense of impotence and rage was only increased with the end of slavery. Chapter 3 discusses aspects of the legal, institutional and cultural exclusionary practices that resulted from the ressentiment and places those practices in an historical context. Some of the consequences are still with us.

The paper then identifies a segment of the population who suffer from ressentiment. They are not the poor, the black, the illegal immigrants. No! “Rather The 18 percent of Americans who identify themselves as Tea Party supporters tend to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45.”\footnote{Kate Zernicke and Megan Thee-Began, “Poll finds Tea Party Backers Wealthy and More Educated,” The New York Times, April 14, 2010. The percentage of Tea Party adherents can only have increased since April, 2010.} It is their myth and their pride that is being undermined. The thesis looks more closely at the profile of Tea Party adherents as an example of those who feel most betrayed by the inevitable failure of the American myth and who blame those whom they find responsible (like the President of the United States). It suggests that, while the Tea Party phenomenon may be a populist expression, it is supported by corporate sponsors who profit from it. The ‘priests’ who focus the ressentiment derive material benefit.
The failure of the myth of American exceptionalism is inevitable. The Promise of America conflates the sacred with the secular; the Garden of Eden cannot be recreated here. The world of the independent yeoman farmer unconstrained by anything but his own willingness to achieve is not possible. In conclusion, chapter 3 explicitly compares the myth with Nietzsche’s philosophy. Given the disparity between our national mythology and our existential condition, which Nietzsche sees as the underlying basis of ressentiment, it is easy to see how ressentiment can arise. The claim of the paper is that there is an element in our society that suffers from ressentiment, evoked by the perceived failure of the Promise of America and that there is no way to satisfy the demands of that element. The country and people have to move on.
CHAPTER 1
NIETZSCHE’S PHILOSOPHY AND RESSENTIMENT

This chapter discusses Nietzsche’s philosophy and his concept of reasentiment. The brief discussion of Nietzsche’s philosophy is necessary in order to provide a context for his concept of reasentiment and to show how these sentiments of anger, spite, hatred, malevolence arise among the population. The introductory section discusses some of the early intellectual influences on Nietzsche, influences that he later incorporated, transmuted, and in many cases rejected. The middle section parses some of his philosophical concepts to show how the concept of reasentiment is integral to his philosophy; and the final section of the chapter focuses on the aspects of reasentiment, aspects that will be further discussed in the concluding chapter, Chapter 3.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) was born in the town of Röcken near Leipzig, in the Prussian Province of Saxony. His father was the Lutheran town minister of Röcken. “Nietzsche’s uncle and grandfathers were also Lutheran ministers, and his paternal grandfather, Friedrich August Ludwig Nietzsche, was further distinguished as a Protestant scholar, one of whose books (1796) affirmed the ‘everlasting survival of Christianity.’ When Nietzsche was 4 years old, his father, Karl Ludwig Nietzsche (1813-1849) died from a brain ailment, and the death of Nietzsche’s two-year-old brother, Joseph, followed six months
Nietzsche was raised in a household of women. “When he entered the Schulpforte School in 1858 at the age of almost fourteen his whole life was permeated by a sincere piety.”

According to Blum, Nietzsche rejected orthodox Christianity about two years before graduating from the school. His focus at Schulpforte was on classical studies.

Nietzsche majored in philology at the University, first at Bonn and then in Leipzig. He was a brilliant student. In 1868, before completing his doctoral work he was appointed to a position on the classical philology department at the University of Basel. He was 24 years old. Thereupon, the University of Leipzig granted him a doctoral degree without his having written a dissertation. He began teaching in the summer semester 1869 and was made a full professor within a year. His teaching career was short, from 1869 to 1879. The teaching was interrupted when he volunteered for service as a medical-orderly in the Franco-Prussian war (1870); he caught both dysentery and diphtheria in the service caring for sick and wounded soldiers, and he may never have recovered completely from his illnesses. But he returned to the University of Basel; he retired due to ill health at age 35. His productive years after he abandoned teaching also lasted only ten years. He had given up his German citizenship and

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had no state, no home base and no job. In 1889 he had a psychotic breakdown and died in 1900.

First I will discuss some of the early intellectual influences on Nietzsche to show how his early relationships and understandings played a role in his evolution and in the development of the concept of ressentiment. These influences included the Pietistic Lutheran faith in which Nietzsche was raised, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which Nietzsche initially found wonderfully exhilarating, and the music and contact with Wagner, which early on were intoxicating and wonderfully supportive. Nietzsche encountered Schopenhauer’s writings when he was 21 years old and met Wagner three years later.

Nietzsche came to reject these three major influences: He gave up his belief in God when he was in his teens. And he came to vehemently and extravagantly reject his early infatuation with the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the music and world view of Wagner.

Nietzsche came from a Lutheran pietistic family. According to Sir Isaiah Berlin, the pietist movement, a branch of Lutheranism, is really at “the root of romanticism.” Pietism involved careful Bible study and “profound respect for the personal relationship of man to God... an emphasis on spiritual life, contempt for learning, contempt for ritual and for form, contempt for pomp and ceremony, and tremendous emphasis upon the... relationship of the individual suffering human soul with his maker... a kind of retreat in depth.... [in order to]
create inwardly that world which some evil fate has denied... externally."⁴ As characterized by Berlin, pietism appealed to a poor and humiliated population. “If you cannot obtain from the world that which you really desire, you must teach yourself not to want it... [It is] a spiritual retreat... in which you try to lock yourself up against the fearful ills of the world.” Berlin calls it a “grand form of sour grapes... The king has robbed me of my possessions: possessions are nothing.... Every kind of wound has been heaped upon you, and therefore you wish to contract yourself into the smallest possible area, so that as little of you as possible is exposed to further wounds.” For the German pietists this included “very moving... personal and violently emotional literature, hatred of the intellect, and... violent hatred of France.”⁵ France represented to the German pietistic movement a glittering court in which the arts flourished as well as the deistic elements of the Enlightenment; i.e., science, materialism, the rejection of spirituality; For the pietistic movement, and the Sturm und Drang literature associated with it, the nature of the universe involves “conflict, collision, tragedy, death – all kinds of horrors.... This view is therefore fatalistic and pessimistic”⁶

Early on Nietzsche rejected all formal, organized religion but the fatalistic, pessimistic world view of pietism and its disdain for the intellect as a means of understanding reality appealed to him. And he found reinforcement in his reading of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer viewed nature as indifferent or even hostile to man. According to Sir Isaiah Berlin

⁴ Ibid., 36-37.
⁵ Ibid., 38.
⁶ Ibid., 56.
Schopenhauer sees man “as being tossed on a kind of frail bark upon a vast ocean of the will, which has no purpose, no end, no direction, which man can resist only at his own peril, with which man can come to terms only if he manages to rid himself of this unnecessary desire to order, to tidy himself up, to create a cozy home for himself in this wild and unpredictable element.”  

According to Allison, for Schopenhauer the “human condition... [is] basically one of necessary confrontation with a world of implacable and antagonistic metaphysical forces; [and to survive in the face of this requires a] “doctrine of cultural pessimism and personal resignation.”

Nietzsche embraced Schopenhauer’s views. He claimed in *Schopenhauer as Educator* “that I understood him as though he had written for me..... I sensed that in him I had discovered that educator and philosopher I had sought for so long.... But I had discovered him only in the form of a book, and that was a great deficiency..... That such a man wrote has truly augmented the joy of living on this earth.... It is true that this is a striving which by its nature leads towards resignation: for what and how much is man able to any kind of improvement at all, in the individual or in the generality!”

Nietzsche embraced Schopenhauer’s atheism, his view of an indifferent, even hostile nature, his resignation before the malevolent world, and even an anti-French sensibility that he ascribes to Schopenhauer. “Schopenhauer's rough and

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7 Ibid., 134.


somewhat bear-like soul teaches us not so much to feel the absence of the suppleness and courtly charm of good French writers as to disdain it, and no one will discover in him that imitated, as it were, silver-plated pseudo-pseudo-Frenchness in which German writers so much indulge.”

Nietzsche met Wagner in 1868; he had a more direct influence on Nietzsche than did Schopenhauer. Nietzsche visited Wagner often at his estate in Tribschen, 50 miles away from Basel, and it has been suggested that Wagner was a kind of father figure to Nietzsche.

“Nietzsche — who had been composing piano, choral and orchestral music since he was a teenager — admired Wagner for his musical genius and magnetic personality. Wagner was the same age Nietzsche’s father would have been, and he had also attended the University of Leipzig many years before” According to Nietzsche’s account of their initial meeting, he and Wagner discussed Schopenhauer among other things and Wagner spoke of Schopenhauer “with indescribable warmth,” which greatly pleased Nietzsche. “Wagner’s interest in classical tragic drama and Schopenhauer, his theories of total art, and a music of the future all helped to develop Nietzsche’s own concepts and to deepen the relationship between the two men.”


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10Ibid., 134.


that art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life, in the sense of that man to whom, as my sublime predecessor on this path, I wish to dedicate this essay.”

Not long afterward Nietzsche repudiated both Schopenhauer and Wagner. By the fall of 1876, Wagner was “no longer the admired genius of classical taste and visionary talent but a cult figure, an exhibitionist personality... a risible spectacle of mysticism and self-indulgence.” According to Allison Nietzsche had come to feel that Wagner represented “the cult of personality, the abandonment of intellectual integrity, the mystique of petty nationalism, and a savage anti-Semitism.” And Nietzsche says of contemporary German music, (read Wagner), that the music and the German spirit are “romanticism through and through... a first rate poison for the nerves... [with] the double quality of a narcotic that both intoxicates and spreads a fog.”

In the new edition of The Birth of Tragedy, 1886, Nietzsche added a preface, An Attempt at Self-Criticism. In it he is very explicit in his rejection of both Wagner and Schopenhauer. He now sees Wagner as both a romantic and a hypocritical exploiter of Christianity, and he completely rejects Schopenhauer’s philosophy of resignation and withdrawal. He quotes Schopenhauer in The World as Will and Resignation on his view of tragedy:


14 Allison, Reading the New Nietzsche, 11.

15 Ibid.

That which bestows on everything tragic its peculiar elevating force is the discovery that the world, that life, can never give real satisfaction, and hence, is not worthy of our affection: this constitutes the tragic spirit—it leads to resignation.17

Nietzsche calls this philosophy ‘romantic;’ it stems “from a fundamental misunderstanding of human existence…. Romanticism could well assume the guise of optimism or pessimism; but in either case, it expressed an essentially hostile attitude toward the very conditions of life. This hostility might appear in the shattered hopes for salvation and redemption—or as the intense longings for human aspiration, bred from personal incapacity and unfulfillment. In any case, the romantic interpretation fears a complex world of human capabilities and dangers, and thus retreats from the world of human concerns, which is, after all, the only world. The romantic attitude forever seeks some form of escape or flight into another world... an ideal world”18 It rejects reality; the world is not enough and one disowns this world to seek a better one beyond, and so seek redemption for the evils of this world: Redemption, which is “the quintessence of all Christian needs.”19

He accuses Schopenhauer of “deep hatred against ‘the Now,’ against ‘reality’…. [and] believing sooner in the Nothing, sooner in the devil than in ‘the Now” and speaks of his “lust for destruction.”20 He says that Schopenhauer calls for a new art, an art of metaphysical

17 Ibid., 24.
18 Allison, Reading the New Nietzsche, 16.
comfort which Nietzsche derides as romantic, and in the end as Christian. Instead Nietzsche tells the young to learn this-worldly comfort and to “learn to laugh.”

Other major intellectual currents in Nietzsche’s world. – less personal but pervasive in the society – supported his anti-religious sentiment. Nietzsche lived in a post-Darwinian, post-Marxist world. *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and volume 1 of *Das Kapital* in 1867. After the publication of *The Origin of Species* many people considered God much less necessary. Natural selection, adaptation, and survival of the fittest seemed sufficient to explain life, including human life. God was no longer necessary to account for either the existence of this universe or the emergence of our human species from prehistoric animals.

For Marx, the concept of God and the institution of religion were oppressive social controls. Humans were creatures of impersonal forces that controlled their lives; they were socially and economically determined. Marx’s economic determinism privileged impersonal forces as determinants of the relation between the individual and society. And Marx predicted the inevitability of the clash of economic forces.

In this discussion of the evolution of Nietzsche’s thought through his personal encounters and his intellectual milieu we can trace a trajectory of Nietzsche’s world from its early pietism to his mature writings. We see foreshadowed some of Nietzsche’s main themes, as they developed:

- A rejection of pietistic religious sentiment and a horror of the pietistic attitude of resignation, submission, and Christian redemption.

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21 Ibid., 26.
• An agreement, nonetheless, with Schopenhauer that the world we inhabit is impersonal and indifferent to human needs and aspirations. Nietzsche draws a different conclusion – not to resign oneself to meaninglessness, but to embrace the ‘here and now,’ the present, and to be joyful and to laugh.

• A rejection of the romantic in German music and philosophy, which to him Wagner embodied. He turned from admiration for the Germanic spirit and music to disdain. In 1878 Nietzsche sent Wagner a copy of new book, _Human, All-to-Human_, “with a motto from Descartes and a dedication to Voltaire (so much for his early anti-French sentiment).”

• A repudiation of nationalism, of German ambition and imperialism, replaced by the ideal of the ‘good European.’

• And, a disowning of Christianity, for Christianity misdirects people into hope for a better world elsewhere or afterwards and blames the inadequacies of this one on some self-constructed “other.” It assigns blame to the godless, encourages a sense of helplessness, and leads to _ressentiment_.

The question now is: How does Nietzsche’s philosophy play out and what is the role of _ressentiment_ in it. One of Nietzsche’s most famous formulations is the statement “God is dead.” Not only is he dead but “We have killed him—you and I. All of us are murderers.... What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?” So God is dead and we killed him. How so?

Darwinian evolution has led to a collapse of all traditional values, “both objective meaning and spiritual purpose had vanished from interpretations of reality (and consequently, there can be

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22 Walter Kaufmann, “Translator’s Introduction to The Case of Wagner,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, _The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner_, 149.

no fixed or certain morality)…. Evolving life is… the ongoing striving toward ever-greater complexity, diversity, multiplicity and creativity.”

Nietzsche says in Daybreak:

Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine origin: this has now become a forbidden way, for at the portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction!

Nietzsche dismisses both faith in science and the nation as viable substitutes for the belief in god. For there is no such “thing as science ‘without any presuppositions’… that thereby affirm another world… and insofar as… [they] affirm this ‘other world,’ does this not mean that [they] have to deny its antithesis, this world, our world…. It is still a metaphysical faith that underlies our faith in science.”

For Nietzsche, with science we still seek an underlying reality, a transcendent truth; science has not rid itself of its teleological underpinnings. Nietzsche also rejects the idea of devotion to the state as a source of meaning. He considers himself to have transcended the parochialism of patriotism and to have overcome the belief in a Christian god and Christian morality; he proclaims that “we are good Europeans and heirs of Europe’s longest and most courageous self-overcoming.”

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25 Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], Book 1, no. 49, 32.


With the death of god, many other aspects of Nietzsche’s world open up: Without a central God, we have no absolute moral order and no absolute given. What Nietzsche posits in its place is the concept of “perspectivism,” a concept consistent with his philological studies. Tradition and culture are determinants of man’s relation to his world; it is through the perspective of our tradition and culture that we come to “understand, interpret, and judge” ourselves, and our relations to the culture."\(^{28}\) Nietzsche’s perspectivist understanding was based in part on his philological research. To reach a deeper understanding of how a particular morality evolved Nietzsche looks at both the etymology of the terms and their historical usage. For example, Nietzsche traces the term “good” to a source that means noble or aristocratic, not generous and self-denying.\(^ {29}\) And these concepts, that regulate society’s understanding of itself and how it should behave, concepts such as justice and goodness, are not rationally determined and fixed for all times. They are perspectivist; i.e., they can radically differ in different societies; they can represent incommensurable conceptual schemes or perspectives, (for example the Judeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman world views) none of which is necessarily more correct than its rivals.

To be moral, to act in accordance with custom, to be ethical means to practice obedience towards a law or tradition established from of old.... He is called ‘good’ who does what is customary as if by nature... To be evil is ‘not to act in accordance with custom’, to practice things not sanctioned by


custom, to resist tradition, however rational or stupid that tradition may be.  

“There is no order of meaning independent of the words or signs used to designate them.... The use of words is entirely conventional, and their significance consists in the manipulation of other words---convenient, agreed-upon fictions.... If the strict univocal reference between word and object, word and meaning, is thus denied, it follows that the classical concept of propositional truth becomes impossibility.”

From Nietzsche’s perspective we live in a world that, in a sense, we make up as we go along, in which we are thrust into a time and place, conditioned by our traditions, customs and environment. There is no deeper reality behind appearance to which we can appeal: Not god, not scientific truth, not morality!

The total character of the world... is in all eternity chaos---in the sense of not a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.... But how can we reproach or praise the universe?....None of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it.... Let us beware of saying there are laws in nature. There are only necessities; there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there is no purpose, you also know that there is no accident.


So, according to Nietzsche, with the death of God and the destruction of an ordered, perhaps benevolent (perhaps not) universe we find ourselves, as other organic creatures, in a world indifferent to our existence, a part of nature, subject to a necessity which is neither good nor evil.

And how do we survive and flourish in such a world without an underlying reality and with no permanent guideposts? Not through our much touted rationality which deceives us; it seeks answers “true answers,” where there are none. How do we make meaning in this world? A world of terror! Not through the doctrine of cultural pessimism and personal resignation of Schopenhauer! We make our mark and find meaning through our exercise of the Will to Power, through the concept of the eternal recurrence, through the expression of art, and through the hope that in the future the most creative can possibly evolve beyond our present state to that of the overman.

We are born with the Will to Power, the same force that animals use to expand and survive. This Will to Power does not provide an underlying unity; it does not express a strength that comes from a central core of being. This Will to Power is all there is with “no… substratum… no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”33 It is a world of nature, totally indifferent to human desire, aspirations, suffering. Nature has no end beyond itself, no teleological goal. The Will to Power is not a thing in itself; i.e., “an order of essences” behind “the flow of appearances…

that accounts for them."34 It is, "‘Nietzsche says, just ‘the last instance which we could go back to...”35 But it is not just “power or force, but... always [the] will for more power.” It is not a reason or a foundation, but “an abyss (abgrund), the groundless chaos beneath all the grounds, all the foundations.”36 The Will to Power is a force that commands and affirms itself. In affirming itself it affirms its difference – not its singleness or unity with another. For Nietzsche, therefore, “appearances are themselves powers; the meanings [that] interpretation places on them are symptoms of a Will to Power that orients them.”37

Nietzsche believes that to try to exclude or disavow power... is a sign of ressentiment. Rather... we should acknowledge and indeed affirm our desire for power and revel in our ability to exercise it. [For Nietzsche] the power principle... [is] a positive, life-affirming force... [a] capacity for will and action, as well as a force that precedes the subject and is felt only through its effect. The subject is constituted retroactively through the act of power or force, rather than being presupposed by it.38

We exercise our Will to Power and live in the present, only in the present, a present that should be lived without regret or despair. It is not that Nietzsche did not experience pain and suffering. His biography reveals both physical pain and psychological isolation. But, for all, the human condition entails pain and suffering – existential pain, for the Will “cannot will backwards.” It is the very Will itself, “the liberator... who... wreaks revenge for his inability to


36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 45.

go backwards. This, indeed, this alone, is what revenge is: the will’s ill will against time and its ‘it was.’”39 Nietzsche’s thesis affirms that man suffers not in time bur from time.”40

"Existential suffering reflects the awareness of abandonment.... [Without God] there is only human truth, the truth of transience.”41 The temptation exists “to rid man of suffering by having the will-to-power abandon its own self-defining forward thrust,”42 which leads to ressentiment. The Will to Power “turns against itself and, in this dynamic inversion, supplants honor with humility and shame with pity.”43 For it is the “rancor against time and the subsequent devaluation of the will-to-power from out of which issues... ‘ressentiment’.”44 For Nietzsche, there is no redemption, no beyond, no purpose but our acknowledgement of the transience of existence.

And how do we accept the salient aspect of existence; i.e. the fact that it passes and that there is no other beyond? For Nietzsche it is “not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn.”45


40 Richard Ira Sugarman, Rancor Against Time The Phenomenology of ‘Ressentiment’ (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1980), 79.

41 Ibid., 80.

42 Ibid., 82.

43 Ibid., 83.

44 Ibid., 84.

For all that is heavy and grave should become light; all that is body, dancer; all that is spirit, bird—and verily, that is my alpha and omega: Oh, how should I not lust after eternity and after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence?46

One should wrest joy from this life and live as if “every event in the history of... [a] person would also have to recur.... It involves affirming everything in one’s life, not wishing for anything to be different... and it teaches us that the task is to live in such a way that you must wish to live it again.”47 Nietzsche calls it “Eternal Recurrence” and Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Recurrence is a plea to overcome the pain of existence through wrestling joy from what is. It is expressed as a wish, as a “What if?” as an aspiration as to how to live one’s life in a world without ground or purpose, an aspiration perhaps beyond human capability.

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence’.... How well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?48

The hope for Nietzsche is that mankind, at least the most creative, will evolve into the overman, who will achieve excellence, find joy in this world, acknowledge difference, celebrate strength, and overcome the hate, pity, self-righteousness, and morality that has sustained us through the Christian era and has

46 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Third Part, no.16, 230.


led to the *ressentiment* that pervades our society. Nietzsche gives voice to the affirmation of life in his statement *For the New Year*:

> Today everybody permits himself the expression of his wish and his dearest thought; hence, I, too, shall say what it is that I wish from myself today, and what was the first thought to run across my heart this year—what thought shall be for me the reason, warranty, and sweetness of my life henceforth. I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati* [love of fate]: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: someday I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.\(^49\)

The concepts of the *overman*, eternal recurrence, and *ressentiment* are linked. The *overman* will “become his own redeemer and joy-bringer.” He will unlearn the “spirit of revenge... and... [be] reconciled with time and something higher.... For that which is the will to power must will something higher than any reconciliation.”\(^50\) The transience of existence is the basic ground of *ressentiment*. The Will to Power is a forward thrust that drives us onward; we humans do not get to live the past over again; i.e., differently, and better. To overcome the spirit of revenge that results from the existential condition, Nietzsche proposes the willing of an eternal recurrence; i.e., a re-living of every moment lived, which is an opening to joy and a rejection of the power of the past, of the ‘it was,’ that cannot be changed or redeemed.

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\(^{49}\) Ibid., no. 276, 223.

\(^{50}\) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Second Part, no. 20, 141.
For Nietzsche, the Greeks, the pre-Socratic Greeks, are a kind of model of how to suffer through the finitude of human existence and overcome the meaningless of life through art, captured in the form of Greek tragedy (as described by Nietzsche in his first book, the Birth of Tragedy. “For it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”

Greek tragedy arises from the dual strains of what Nietzsche characterizes as the Apollonian and the Dionysian, after the two gods. The Apollonian, associated with the plastic arts, particularly sculpture, represents the clear, the delineated, the appearance, the limited, made more real through dreams but with identifiable elements—“discrete artistic forms... creatively imposed upon the unformed or chaotic raw materials of nature,” the creation of singular excellence from chaos. The Dionysian, associated with music, expresses the underlying feeling of loss-of-self that we experience when listening to music, in orgiastic frenzy, madness, intoxication, in states of ecstasy. The Apollonian acknowledges the creativity, expression, achievement of excellence of the individual; the Dionysian takes us beyond self, beyond limit, to “awesome, joyful, and occasionally fear-inspiring expenditures of energy and eroticism.”

The sense of tragedy emerges from our awareness of the chaos beneath and our inability to control our destiny and permanently make our lives into a work of art (qua Apollo) and our acknowledgement of both the appeal and the panic that comes from loss of self in Dionysian ecstasy, in an attempt to overcome the underlying horror. And the essential “point of distinction between... [them] centers on

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51 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, sec. 5, 52.

52 Allison, Reading the New Nietzsche, 18.

53 Ibid., 19.
individuation or its absence;"\(^54\) i.e., individual, stable order and measure vs. loss of stable identity in some form of sensual ecstasy. Nature, for Nietzsche, is amoral, chaotic, unknowable, indifferent. Greek civilization sustained itself through the Apollonian “veil of beautiful appearance thrown over the horrors of chaos,"\(^55\) and the loss of self provided by the Dionysian “art that, in its intoxication, spoke the truth,"\(^56\) a truth of self-oblivion, excess, contradiction. And both, from Nietzsche’s perspective, “were basic types of responses to the issues the Greeks found most vital, the problems of ordinary and extraordinary human existence.”\(^57\)

For the Greeks were aware that they lived in a world of necessity, not of their making. Through art, that is, through the tension and the incorporation of both the singleness of creation of the perfect instance and the abandonment of self to the Dionysian frenzy, Greek culture, according to Nietzsche, could survive and make meaning in a world of chaos. The tragic hero is bound to come to grief because he acts “as an individual.” But Nietzsche claims that tragic drama is not, therefore, depressive; “for suffering... is overcome and transfigured”\(^58\) by the joy of experiencing beauty. The illusion of perfection achieved through art over nature is then overcome in the re-unification with nature through the tragic supplementation of

\(^54\) Ibid., 40.


\(^56\) Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, sec. 4, 46.

\(^57\) Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche*, 31.

\(^58\) Ibid., 54-55.
nature by the Dionysian identification with the whole. According to Nietzsche, the Greek world found such a degree of “human joy and belonging [in a world of suffering] that there was no desire to flee or to escape the world.”

And Nietzsche, in his world, sought to embrace fate, to accept limit and yet affirm existence ecstatically apprehended in beauty, without hope, without expectation, with love of what is.

To learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati* [love of fate]: let that be my love henceforth!

But with Judaism and Christianity alternative ways of survival were found. In Nietzsche’s view, human suffering and the inability to sustain the pain of existence; i.e., existential pain compounded by the enslavement of the Jews and the oppression of the Christians, lead to a rejection of this world and a placing of faith and hope in an afterworld. “For it was suffering and incapacity that created all afterworlds... weariness that wants to reach the ultimate with one leap, with one fatal leap, a poor ignorant weariness that does not want to want any more: this created all gods and afterworlds.”

Religious institutions diverted mankind from its natural path, tamed it, made it impotent, unable to accept the reality of existence and to acclaim life in the face of it.

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59 Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche*, 56.


Man’s basic nature is an animal nature of aggression and appropriation. Man by nature lives in innocence, driven by passions and desires, by the Will to Power, with no conscience or sense of sin. He acts out of necessity. His instincts are basically animal. He gets pleasure from action, from exercise of self (i.e. force), from overcoming. In the Graeco-Roman society the aristocratic, noble man was honored, as reflected in the “Greek gods, these reflections of noble and autocratic human beings in whom the animal in man felt itself deified and did not tear itself apart;”

Christian morality has caused man to suppress his instincts – at a high price. It has tamed and channeled man’s spirit and his behavior; but it has not changed his instincts.

The Judeo-Christian God, according to Nietzsche, is a “holy God... [who embodied] the self-crucifixion and self-violation of man...” who honored the common man, the poor the meek. Man adapted his nature; and, in doing so, acted with cruelty to his animal-self, regarding his natural inclinations with an evil eye. He honored those ideals hostile to life, “contrary to sense, instinct, nature, animal... ideals that slander the world.” For “confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality) life must continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life is something essentially amoral... Morality, itself, -- how now? might


\[\text{\footnotesize 63 Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 64 Ibid., sec. 24, 95.}\]
not morality be "a will to negate life." And so the man of religion, of bad conscience, has a terrible guilt.

[A] guilt before God: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him. He apprehends in "God" the ultimate antithesis of his own ineluctable animal instincts; he reinterprets these animal instincts themselves as a form of guilt before God (as hostility, rebellion, insurrection)... In this psychical cruelty there resides a madness of the will... the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for; his will to think himself punished without any possibility of the punishment being equal to the guilt.66

And it is the priestly class, according to Nietzsche the "most impotent... [who are] the truly great haters in world history," who inverted the "aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)... saying, 'the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God... and you, the powerful and noble, are... the evil, the cruel... the godless to all eternity.... There begins the slave revolt in morality."67 And there, according to Nietzsche, ressentiment finds expression.

The slave revolt in morality begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the ressentiment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself;"and this No is its creative deed. The inversion of the value-positing eye—the need to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of ressentiment: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs,

65 Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, sec 5, 23.


67 Ibid., First Essay, no.7, 33-34.
physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction.68

The person of ressentiment blames the “other” and seeks answers on an individual level to the question of “Why me?” He does not acknowledge the reality of a world of indifference and necessity into which we are thrust. The term encompasses a sense of powerlessness that is alleviated by feelings of hate, envy, spite. It premises the “other” as all-powerful and sees oneself as “powerless to express these feelings actively against the person or social stratum evoking them... [there is] a continual re-experiencing of this impotent hostility.”69

The basic cause of ressentiment for Nietzsche is existential, the transience of existence; the particulars are embedded in a specific society. Who is to blame? The Greeks found a way to accept the limitations of existence through their expression of both the singular and excellent in beauty and the loss of self in excess. The Jews and Christians, the monotheistic religions, abandoned the concept of necessity. Instead we have the concepts of redemption and salvation. But in this world, the here and now, the concept of ressentiment expresses the outrage at limitation and the gratification of blame.

Further Exploration of Concept of Ressentiment

Let’s look at the concept of ressentiment in a more systematic fashion so that we can better understand its roots in American society and its current manifestations. Where does

68 Ibid., no.10, 36-37.

the term come from and why does Nietzsche use the French word, *ressentiment*, rather than the German equivalent? There are multiple reasons. First, the German language has no close equivalent to the French term; Secondly, in his emergence from Wagner’s influence, Nietzsche became “more Francophile than... any other major German writer... Nietzsche saw himself as the heir of the French moralists and as a ‘good European.’” And, so, the French term suited him better. Third, there is a constellation of understandings attached to the word, *ressentiment*, as defined, or redefined by Nietzsche, concerning morality, that does not exist elsewhere; as stated by Nietzsche in his preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*, it is a question of “where our good and evil really originated.” In fact, he says, “the problem of the origin of evil pursued me even as a boy of thirteen.” For in this treatise Nietzsche presents a “history of the moralization of various values... which existed in related forms and with different significance before they were appropriated by Christianity and turned into the guiding principles of contemporary... life.” He looks at concepts of morality from a perspectivist understanding and within an etymological framework. The same word in different circumstances has counter meanings; e.g., take the word “happy.” For the noble person being happy is an action. Happiness is an activity, doing that which adds value and gives pleasure: The action of the Will to Power and the expansive extension of it. This is “very much the opposite of “happiness” at the level of the impotent, the oppressed, and those in


71 Ibid, Nietzsche’s Preface, no. 3, 16.

whom poisonous and inimical feelings are festering, with whom it appears as essentially
drug, rest, peace, ‘sabbath,’ slackening of tension and relaxing of limbs, in short,

passivity.”

And these inimical feelings produce ressentiment, the last stage of which is the
inversion of value, so that what is really desired becomes evil.

The ressentiment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and
compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality
develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality ... says No to what is
outside,“ what is “different,” what is “not oneself”; and this No is its creative deed.
The reversal of the value-positing eye—this need to direct one’s view outward instead
of back to oneself is the essence of ressentiment;

in order to exist, slave morality first needs a hostile external world; it needs,
physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is
fundamentally reaction.74

The various elements include:

- A basic sense of impotence and ineffectuality that cannot be overcome and,
  therefore, an inability to act in one’s own interest, for one’s own good, for
  the expression and expansion of one’s Will to Power.

- Feelings of envy, malice and vindictiveness toward those who are “different”
  and appear powerful.

- An accompanying need to belittle and scorn the “other,” the powerful, as
  threatening and evil.

- A self-definition that is a reaction against what the “other” has or is, rather
  than a genuine sense of self. The sense of self is in opposition to the
  “other.”

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73 Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo, First
Essay, sec. 11, 38.

74 Ibid., sec. 10, 36-37.
• An inversion of values, based on the reaction against the “other,” calling evil what is really desired but cannot be obtained; e.g., the fox and grapes syndrome, the fox claiming that the grapes were really sour and would make you sick if you ate them.

• An inexhaustible need for revenge. As the feelings of impotence are permanent, the need for revenge against the imaginary cause is permanent, “detached from all determinate objects,” and cannot be satisfied.

• An ongoing reinforcement of the sense of vengeance through seeking out and finding causes in the external world to justify it, resulting in a “falsification of the world view;” there is an obscure awareness that “one lives in a sham world which one is unable to penetrate.”

• At its most destructive, “a continuing comparison with others accompanied by hidden feelings of self-disvalue” resulting in existential envy “directed against the other person’s very nature,” as if to say: “I can forgive everything, but not that you are what you are—indeed that I am not you.” The existence of the other is an “unbearable humiliation.”

The phenomenon is manifest in the behavior of the father, Fyodor, in The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoyevsky as described by James Wood:

Fyodor decides that he will act scandalously in the dining room, too. Why? Because, he thinks to himself, “it always seems to me, when I go somewhere, that I am lower than everyone else and that they all take me for a buffoon—so let me indeed play the buffoon, because all of you, to a man, are lower than I am.” And as he thinks this, he remembers being asked once why he hated a certain neighbor, to which he had replied: “He never did anything to me, it’s true, but I once played a most shameless, nasty trick on him, and the moment I did it, I immediately hated him for it....

In Fyodor’s case—and perhaps it is always the case with any colossal egotism—other people appear to have become himself. He dislikes his neighbor because of something that he, Fyodor, did to him: "I once played a most shameless, nasty trick on him, and the moment I did it, I immediately hated him for it." Clearly Fyodor longs—however

75 Scheler, Ressentiment, 55.

76 Ibid., 42.

77 Ibid., 35.
buried the original religious sentiment—to punish himself, because he hates himself. But since other people have merged with him, he punishes himself by punishing other people, and hates himself by hating other people.

And this leads to a Sisyphean repetition of behavior. Self-punishment of this twisted kind means being condemned to re-enact scandal after scandal without cease, because each self-punishment has become indistinguishable from sinning. The sin itself has become the punishment for that sin, and each sin, being another act of outrage, just opens the wound again. Clearly there is no way that Fyodor Karamazov could ever stop behaving badly to his neighbor, since there is no logic by which he could possibly begin to feel warmly toward him. He would have to like himself, and that is not going to happen.78

Fyodor has a personalist world view, filled with self hate at his own worthlessness. He assumes that the individual matters in some grand scheme, that there is a supreme, singular God, who gives meaning and who judges. It is a world that privileges the individual as significant in the structure of the universe, and Fyodor finds himself despicable.

But for Nietzsche a world view that privileges the individual is a form of insanity. The only sane choice in this world of nature, totally impersonal nature, where good and evil are of our making and God does not exist, is to release oneself into the Will to Power -- the same force of will as other animals -- to expand our world, to grasp life, to exercise strength and find what is – good. We have no choice but to obey the necessity of existence. We can choose to wrest joy from the experience and seek to overcome. To complain, to whine, to be filled with ressentiment is an expression of weakness; it lets others define who we are and deprives us of the joy of expansion that comes with the exercise of our Will to Power.

In the next chapter we turn to the United States, a culture alien to Nietzsche’s hope for the future: A God-fearing country with a strongly religious populous, with a strong, moral sense, with a personalist world view of inherited entitlement, with a politically democratic and economically inequitable structure, with a sense of unbounded freedom and capability and – at times, a strong feeling of *ressentiment* on the part of a segment of the populace. Chapter 2 looks at the sources of the myth of American exceptionalism.
What does the phrase *Take America Back* mean? Take it back from whom and for what? What is the America that is threatened or lost? This chapter discusses the sources of the myth of American exceptionalism, the narrative of our mythic history that may no longer be sustainable, and may indeed be lost.

The genesis of the American myth of the Promised Land can be traced back to the world of the early settlers, to the ideologies in which they believed in and the way those ideologies played out in the new world. The understandings of man’s place in the universe that cohered to form the American sense of selfhood came from various sources: The belief in the Puritan mission, the Lockean philosophy of natural rights and the social contract, and the opportunity for westward expansion.

This chapter discusses the sources of the myth in the American consciousness and the modifications and expansion of the myth that resulted in an underlying sense of American exceptionalism.

**From the Beginning**

The first successful English colonies in the New World were in Virginia and New England. The colonies were structured differently and each, separately, was committed to its own distinct and separate pattern of an established church.
Virginia, named for the Virgin Queen, was founded in 1607 as an English colony with a conformist clergy of the Church of England. The English Protestant Church even “survived... through the 1650s”\(^1\) during the disestablishment of the Church under Cromwell’s reign. From the beginning, however, the colony rejected the establishment of a bishop in Virginia; lay people ran the parishes rather than clergymen. There was an established Anglican Church but not a very zealous population.

From early on, the south depended on the institution of slavery to sustain it economically, a dependency that increased in time with the significant growth of a cotton crop. The major crops in the colonial period were tobacco and sugar. The south “became deeply enmeshed in the system of importing African slaves to America, [a policy that] had sustained the Iberian colonies since the sixteenth century.”\(^2\) “Blacks outnumbered whites in South Carolina by the 1710s and in Virginia the proportion of blacks to whites shot up from less than 10 per cent in 1680 to about a third in 1740.... The further south, the larger the number of slaves.”\(^3\) According to an estimate by an Anglican missionary there were around 46,000 slaves in South Carolina in 1762.

The first colony in the northern region that survived, Plymouth, was founded in 1620. The group set out from Holland, was joined by others in England, and sailed to the new world with 101 passengers and a crew of 48. By the spring of 1621 half had died from scurvy,

\(^2\) Ibid., 523.
\(^3\) Ibid., 541.
general debility, and other unknown causes. The Pilgrims wanted complete separation from
the Church of England, and came to the new world from Holland in search of a “less restricting
place to become a ‘civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation.’”
Under Charles I, who reigned from 1625 until his execution in 1649, many more felt compelled to
leave. In the 1630s, “perhaps as many as 20,000 [English] immigrated to the New World...
more than the entire contemporary population of Norwich, the largest city in early Stuart
England after London.” The leaders of the new colony migrated with their families to establish
a Puritan religious community in an area they called the New England; they were committed to
“starting England afresh overseas.” Technically the Puritans established a theocracy – a state
run by the Church. But “secular government of the elect, ‘the ‘Saints,’ were in charge of the
Commonwealth.... In 1631 the franchise for the colony’s assembly was limited to Church
members.”

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, set sail for the
new colony in 1630 on board the Arbella. While in passage he delivered a sermon, A Model of
Christian Charity, that set forth many of the precepts on which the colony was founded,
precepts that have been adapted and expanded, but still resonate with the American sense of self:

That the community in the new world shall be both a religious and civil society.

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5 ibid.
6 Ibid., 538.
For the work we have in hand. It is by a mutual consent, through a special overvaluing providence and a more than an ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical.

That the Puritans in the new land shall be like the people of Israel, a chosen people. They shall prevail over their enemies and shall be a beacon, blessed by the Lord, a model for “succeeding plantations.”

The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways... We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill.

That, like the people of Israel, the Puritans shall have a covenant with God, that extends to the possession of the new land.

[For if we] walk in his ways and... keep his commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our covenant with him... that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it.

That, should the new plantation not uphold the covenant, God shall take revenge and cause destruction in the colony. Natural disasters in the colony are a sign of God’s anger.

Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work... but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded... [and seek] great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.7

The Puritans’ claim to the land was made more explicit by John Cotton, a leading Puritan clergyman, in his farewell sermon to the departing Puritans before they left

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Southampton for the New World; for, as Cotton asserted, God granted the new country to the Puritans and they have the right to drive out the heathen and take the land.

Now God makes room for a people 3 ways:

First, when he casts out the enemies of a people before them by lawfull warre with the inhabitants, which God calles them unto: as in Ps. 44. 2. *Thou didst drive out the heathen before them*. But this course of warring against others, & driving them out without provocation, depends upon speciall Commission from God, or else it is not imitable.

When hee makes a Countrey though not altogether void of inhabittants, yet void in that place where they reside. Where there is a vacant place, there is liberty for the sonne of Adam or Noah to come and inhabite... [The king] admitteth it as a Principle in Nature, That in a vacant soyle, hee that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his Right it is. And the ground of this is from the grand Charter given to Adam and his posterity in Paradise, Gen. 1. 28. *Multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it*. If therefore any sonne of Adam come and finde a place empty, he hath liberty to come, and fill, and subdue the earth there. This Charter was renewed to Noah, Gen. 9. 1. Fulfill the earth and multiply: So that it is free from that common Grant for any to take possession of vacant Countries.8

And should the Puritans uphold the covenant, God’s favor will bring prosperity here on earth. The theocracy, said William Hooke in 1645, will beautify the land with “not only a spituall glory... but also an externall, and visible glory.”9 For here “the gospel has brought in its right hand Eternal Salvation. And in its left hand, Riches with Protection and Deliverance from Enemies.”10

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The Puritans’ sense of themselves and their world foreshadow America’s self-definition; it became part of our mythical past. The community was both a religious and a civil society, the two inextricably bound. The civil society reflected the religious commandments. Public and private behavior must accord with God’s ways for his glory and praise to shine forth. The concept of America as a sacred place, the Promised Land, was incorporated in our understanding of ourselves. The promise was that the society would prevail, the land would be ours, the enemy would be vanquished, and the new plantation would be a “city on a hill,” a beacon for the world. The threat was that should we falter and not live up to our ideals, God’s wrath would descend upon us.

But how did the sustaining story, this meta-narrative of a small group of people in New England, morph into the myth of American exceptionalism? And what does this have to do with Nietzsche and ressentiment? So far we have part of the story.

The Myth Expands and is Transformed

In the mid-18th century (from approximately 1740 – 1760) a great religious revival, called the First Great Awakening, erupted in the colonies. The religious upheaval was “‘great and general... it knew no boundaries, social or geographical ... it was both urban and rural... it reached both [the] lower and upper class.’”11 In the Chesapeake Bay area and Virginia “succeeding waves of New Light Presbyterians, Separate Baptists and finally Methodists swept

up new converts... Between 1769 and 1774 the number of Baptist churches in Virginia alone increased from seven to fifty-four.”

Lead by ministers, itinerant preachers, and lay persons, the Great Awakening spread the Puritan image of America as the Promised Land throughout the colonies. The leaders implored all Protestants to come to God. Those who did not heed the message were warned that they would suffer God’s wrath on earth and in heaven. Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758), one of the most influential voices of the revival, in July, 1754, called on all to convert, become holy, and flee God’s wrath.

God’s creatures are good, and were made for men to serve God with, and do not willingly subserve to any other purpose, and groan when they are abused to purposes so directly contrary to their nature and end.... There are black clouds of God’s wrath now hanging directly over your heads...

Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether inexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God....

Consider this, you that are here present, that yet remain in an unregenerate state. That God will execute the fierceness of his anger, implies, that he will inflict wrath without any pity....

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners... Many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state... How awful is it to be left behind at such a day.... Will you be content to be the children of the devil, when so many other children in the land are converted, and are

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become the holy and happy children of the King of kings?.... Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come.\textsuperscript{13}

Wildly emotional sermons evoked uncontrollable responses. The reaction to one of Edwards’ sermons, preached in the same year, was recorded by a Boston merchant, Samuel Philip Savage.

"Groans," "Screaches," "Houlings," and "Yellings" exploded onto the village green and reverberated across the surrounding fields. Sinners languishing in spiritual distress crumpled to the ground, their bodies contorting with such violence, according to one witness, that "you would have thought their bones all broken, or rather that they had no bones." Others experienced ecstatic release from their hellish "distress" and "were brought to different degrees of Peace & Joy, Some to Rapture." Edwards prayed with the writhing mass of "Children, Youth[s] and aged persons of both Sexes" for the next several hours before his perennially weak frame gave way and he yielded his labors to "4 of 5 private Xtians [Christians]."\textsuperscript{14}

The causes for this widespread evangelical, religious outbursts varied; they were "often diverse, complicated, and local in their origins.... In general, they grew out of people’s attempts to adjust to the disturbing changes in their social relationships caused by demographic and commercial developments... In Connecticut, for example, New Light religious awakenings... centered precisely in those eastern counties most unsettled by population growth, trade, and paper-money emissions."\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15} Wood, \textit{The Radicalism of the American Revolution}, 145.
However, we are not primarily concerned with the causes of the Great Awakening but with its impact on the emerging American sense-of-self. From the time of the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay colony, the secular and religious reinforced each other. With the Great Awakening the concept of religious mission spread beyond the Puritans and became part of the American myth. Itinerant preachers and ministers sought to redeem all Protestants, to save them, and help them walk in God’s way, sometimes even including women, Native Americans and African Americans.

Edwards and other preachers of the movement expanded the concept of a new chosen people, and “enlarged its constituency from saintly New England theocrats to newborn American saints.”\(^\text{16}\) With the Great Awakening the concept of the sacredness of the community spread from Puritan New England; “the story of America was [now] intrinsic to sacred history.”\(^\text{17}\) Edwards put the concept of progress in the New World at the heart of the redemption of sinners; for now God had “changed the course of nature and caused the sun to go from the west to the east.”\(^\text{18}\) And the holy community of the Puritans, extended to all saved Christians, created an expanded sense of America’s destiny.

Manifestations of this new sense of American providence were apparent in the attitude of Anglo-American Protestants toward the French and Indian war, toward the claims on the western territories, and in the increased focus on business and trade. The three areas


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 107.

found justification in the same principle: the favor granted by God to Anglo-American
Protestants of an expanded, prosperous land.

The Seven Years War (1756-63), a major European conflict, was called the French and
Indian War in North America. The Protestant clergy called it a “holy war” of Anglo-Protestants
against Catholics. The defeat of French Canada was a religious mission. “For the clergy of
1760... Catholic Quebec... [was] the last bastion of evil.”19 “The French were ‘the offspring of
the Scarlet Whore’; French Canada ‘the North American Babylon’; and the invasion itself a
‘grand decisive conflict between the Lamb and Beast’. ”20 A Protestant American victory...
[was] the American Way;”21 it was a religious victory, and extended “the Anglo-Protestant
errand into the Catholic wilderness,”22 in order to take over the Catholic occupied trans-
Allegheny west. The celebration of victory was short-lived; Great Britain in 1774 issued the
Quebec Act that granted most of the conquered territory to Quebec, and left French civil law
intact in the area. The resulting outrage was a significant cause of the Revolution two years
later.

The claims to the wilderness, the so-called empty lands, and to unfettered economic
expansion were also grounded in religious belief, in the promise of America. Westward
expansion was tied to the glory of God. The Puritan errand had become part of American self-

20 Ibid., 37.
21 Ibid.
identification. The errand meant “first of all, migration—not simply from one place to another, but from a depraved Old World to a New Canaan…. The newness of their New World was prophetic: it signaled the long-awaited new heaven and new earth of the millennium.”

The myth of the exodus and the conquest gave the Puritans the right to the land. They were promised it. “The wilderness belonged to their errand before the errand belonged to them….

Migration... [was] a function of prophecy, and prophecy... an unlimited license to expand.”

For the Puritan the journey into the wilderness was a personal pilgrimage “through the world’s wilderness to redemption.... a matter of personal self-assertion” And in this errand “piety and prosperity” grew together. The migration was one of process, from the past to the future – a journey into the uncharted distance with God’s help and the support of the community of like-minded adherents.

For the Puritans considered that they were “not just another creed, but the last stage of the worldwide work of redemption.... [They were] a chosen nation in progress—a New Israel whose constituency was as numerous, potentially, as the entire people of God, and potentially as vast as America.” In a commemorative sermon on the Revolution in 1784, Thomas Blockway made the prophecy explicit: “It is apparent that [the]... three thousand miles of Western territory” constitute the “stage on which [God means] to exhibit the great

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23 Bercovitch, The Rites of Assent, 32.
24 Ibid., 32-33.
25 Ibid., 33.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 35.
things of His Kingdom.”  

And according to John Mellon in a sermon on the annual election of the governor of Massachusetts in 1797 “if we maintain our rate of westward expansion... we will achieve that ‘which the scripture prophecies represent as constituting the glory of the latter days.’”

The sense of progress and optimism were compatible with the spirit of capitalism. According to the American dream, hard work, industry, and ingenuity would raise one’s place in society, and increase one’s possessions, security, and respectability. If one failed in the Promised Land it was both a sign of individual insufficiency and lack of God’s favor; in the Calvinist Puritan ethic, economic failure indicated lack of character, moral irresponsibility, and insufficiency before an all knowing and all powerful God. In 1726 Samuel Willard made a systematic study of Puritan teachings. He listed the main virtues as “frugality, industry, liberality, and parsimony.... Frugality, for example, is not self-denial but ‘consists in a Prudent Management of our outward Affairs.’ It is a way of dealing with the things of this world, but not for their own sake, for it is also a way of meeting one's obligation to God.” The combination merged self-interest and religious zeal to greatly increase American prosperity. “A Swiss theologian [in the 1850s] commented that ‘the acquisition of riches is to


29 Ibid., 114. Bercovitch quotes from John Mellen, “A Sermon, Delivered Before His Excellency the Governor, and the Honourable Legislature, of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, on the Annual Election,” May, 1797.

them [the Americans] only a help toward higher moral and spiritual values.”\(^\text{31}\) And Max Weber emphasized that the United States was the only purely bourgeois country.\(^\text{32}\) As Max Weber expressed it in Religion and the Rise of the Protestant Ethic, “the spirit of capitalism ... was present [in the new world] before the capitalistic order.”\(^\text{33}\)

And the American free population “on the eve of revolution was over 60 per cent English, nearly 80 per cent British and 98 per cent Protestant. Immigration usually made up less than 15-20 per cent of the colonies’ white population growth.”\(^\text{34}\) What distinguished the Americans from surrounding populations was that “The Americans were considered to be White, in contrast to the Natives and black slaves, they were Protestant and English (in speech and surname), unlike the Catholic French to the north and west and the Spanish to the south, and they were Liberal democrats, in contrast to the British, both at home and in the colonies to the north.”\(^\text{35}\)

**Locke, Jefferson and American Exceptionalism**

The Puritan promise of the special destiny of America was not the only source of the myth of American exceptionalism. A different justification was found in the political


\(^{32}\) Ibid.


\(^{35}\) Ibid., 445.
philosophy of John Locke, especially when that philosophy was coupled the myth of the Saxon origins of the English settlers. This myth does not cohere with the Puritan self-identity into a single narrative; but together they result in a common sense of promise and entitlement for the Anglo-Protestant settlers.

John Locke (1632–1704) was the most influential political philosopher during the revolutionary period. In Two Treatises of Government, he argued that people by nature are free and equal, that they have ‘natural rights,’ such as the right to life, liberty, and property that have a foundation independent of the laws of any particular society. Legitimate governments are based on a social contract whereby people in the state of nature conditionally transfer some of their rights to government in order to better insure the stable, comfortable enjoyment of their lives, liberty, and property. Since governments exist by the consent of the people in order to protect the rights of the people and promote the public good, governments that fail to do so can be resisted and replaced with new governments.

For those revolutionary leaders who based their opposition go British rule on Enlightenment principles and the philosophy of Locke, the moral and legal claim for the Revolution against Great Britain was based on natural rights, the “rights of human nature.... [for] kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people.” And the clear inference for some of the Revolutionary leaders, especially Jefferson and those who followed him, was that while government was a possibly necessary evil - the least government, the best.

\[36\] Ibid.
Around the time of the American Revolution the Whigs in England were also seeking greater freedom; i.e., the more limited exercise of government power and greater control of their property. They found justification for their claims in their historical connection to the early Saxon settlers in the British Isles who came to England long before the Norman invasion and who represented, according to the myth, “an idealized version of an Anglo-Saxon democracy, which... [was] overturned by Norman treachery and feudalism.”

The Saxon myth was also prevalent in the colonies in the revolutionary period. In 1764, James Otis, a prominent lawyer and politician in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, stated that the Saxons enjoyed the “most perfect liberty.... Lands were divided among the individuals in proportion to the rank they held in the nation, and.... every freeholder had a right to vote at the election of members of Parliament.” This most perfect system was destroyed by the Normans, who imposed “feudal tyranny upon gothic liberty.” In 1776 at the General Congress in New York, a member of the radical Pennsylvania delegation to the Convention, using the pseudonym Demophilus, reinforced his argument for independence in a pamphlet *The Genuine principles of the Ancient Saxon, or English Constitution*. He relates his understanding that a golden age existed in England before the Normans destroyed the Saxon “natural, wise, and equal government, which has deservedly obtained the admiration of every civilized age and country.

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Jefferson adopted the Saxon myth. He compared the Saxon emigration from northern Europe to Britain with the colonists’ movement from Great Britain to America, and claimed not only a cultural connection but a genetic basis. In 1776 Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, were asked to make a recommendation for an appropriate seal for the United States of America, Jefferson reiterated the genetic connection with the Saxons for he proposed that the first great seal of the United States display on one side “the Saxon chiefs, [Hengist and Hors], from whom we claim the honour of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed.’ (italics added).” 40 The initial proposal for the other side was a display of the “Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by Day, and a Pillar of Fire by night.” 41 The seal was not adopted; if it had been it would have included both mythic inheritances: Religious and historical.

This story of natural rights and inherited freedom contributed profoundly to our emerging sense of ourselves. The myth as it evolved from these sources has the following elements:

- **That independent yeoman farmers are the mainstay of this country; they are a free people, beholden to and dependent on no outside authority.** The true representative of this country is the independent farmer beholden to no one, coming in the virgin land of America; and, just as our sturdy Saxon ancestors took possession of the land and created a democracy in England, so the yeoman farmer of excellent moral fiber, descended from Saxon stock, is the mainstay of the new society.

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41 Ibid.
• **That owning and cultivating land make for a good citizen, not formal education.** Jefferson identified the common moral sense necessary for a free and independent republic with “those who labour in the earth... the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people.” Jefferson had faith in the moral rectitude of the people; the moral sense that was not dependent on formal education; those who work their land and till the soil, the independent yeomen were morally good; “corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.” Rather it is dependence on others that “begets subservience and venality” and that degree of corruption can be measured by “the aggregate of the other classes of citizens... in any state [in relation] to that of its husbandmen.”

• **That the least government was the best.** Wood states that Jefferson “hated all bureaucracy and all the coercive instruments of government, and he sometimes gave the impression that government was only a device by which the few attempted to rob cheat, and oppress the many.” Along with Thomas Paine he had a faith in the citizen’s voluntary association in community and society and a deep distrust of government, for “Society... is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness.”

• **That the land the colonists came to was basically uninhabited and available for the taking.** “All the lands within the limits which any particular society has circumscribed around itself are assumed by that society, and subject to their allotment only. This may be done by themselves, assembled collectively, or by their legislature, to whom they may have delegated sovereign authority, and if they are allotted in neither of these ways, each individual of the society may appropriate to himself such lands as he finds vacant, and occupancy will give him title.”

• **That those entitled to claim the land were the Anglo-American settlers.** America was peopled by and for the benefit of the colonists. In this scheme

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44 Ibid., Wood quotes Tom Paine.

Indians, blacks, Spaniards, Catholics did not fare well. At one time Jefferson had a vision that (what he called) America might include Canada to the north and the Spanish and French possessions to the south. In 1801 he wrote James Monroe, governor of Virginia: “it is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself beyond those limits, & cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, & by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface.”

With regard to hostile Indians north of the Ohio River, he told Clarke that “the end proposed should be their extermination, or their removal beyond the lakes or Illinois river. The same world will scarcely do for them and us…. The ‘Empire for liberty’ was for whites only. The twin goals of Indian removal and African colonization were essential components of the project, at least in Jefferson’s imagination. He even had difficulty assimilating Frenchmen as citizens after the Louisiana Purchase.”

• That the Anglo-American colonists were, innocent, free of the past and could remake themselves anew. Here in the new world the colonists were “happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race… self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.” Jefferson even claimed that each generation could restructure government completely anew. “Yet it is a question of such consequence… [as to be placed] among the fundamental principles of government…. I set out on this ground which I suppose to be self-evident, ‘that the earth belong in usufruct to the living’ that the dead have neither power nor rights over it.”

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Jefferson, who believed in the rational grounds for the Promise of America, invoked the religious appeal in his 2nd Inaugural Address. “I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his with his providence, and our riper years with his wisdom and power.” The citizens inherited a Promise, and a belief in a future that was essential to their sense of self as Americans.

In a slightly different formulation, the myth includes the following elements:

- **In this Promised Land piety and prosperity reinforces each other.**
  With sufficient piety, one should see God’s rewards on this earth.

- **America is a sacred place, the Promised Land, a shining example to the world.**
  We will prevail, the land would be ours, the enemy would be vanquished, and the new plantation would be a “city on a hill,” a beacon for the world.

- **The land – from sea to shining sea - belongs by right to the inheritors, male, white, Protestant without constraint.**
  They go forth into the wilderness to conquer it, without constraints from government, for large institutions are corrupt and they impede individual exercise of choice.

- **Americans are free of the burden of history.**
  The past has no consequences; it is a new beginning each time. In escaping history there is a sense of experiential innocence. We are born knowing the truth.

- **Americans have a sense of progress, optimism, practicality, and ingenuity.**

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We, as a people, have a sense of nostalgia for this mythical self-created past. Chapter 3 looks at how the myth of American exceptionalism survived and has bred a profound sense of *ressentiment* among some segments of the population – a *ressentiment* that operates today.
CHAPTER 3
EXPANSION AND THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE

This section briefly describes how the myth of American exceptionalism survived and adapted to new realities; i.e., the transformation in the first half of the nineteenth century of the United States from a rural, primarily Protestant, Anglo-American slave nation to a major capitalist multi-ethnic, though still slave, country. It looks at the impact of the unfilled Promise of America, and the accompanying ressentiment on subject parts of our population, using immigrant groups and the African American population as examples, and on current sufferers from it: The Tea Party adherents. The chapter concludes with a brief return to Nietzsche and the understanding that those suffering from ressentiment cannot be satisfied by policy changes to meet their demands. The condition is existential and irremediable.

In the early nineteenth century, the concept of the ‘self-made man’ took hold. The term became popular; the idea was embedded in the already evolving sense of an American self. The self-made man was not “bourgeois but independent, not parvenu or nouveau riche but adaptable, self-educated and self-reliant.”¹ The phrase, from Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography² celebrated the rags to riches phenomenon – In conjunction with the new thinking; patronage was condemned, a liberal arts education was considered useless, and the “ability to make money – not whom one knew or who one’s father was, or where one went to

² Ibid., 342.
college – now became the only proper democratic means for distinguishing one man from another.”

And Americans had substantial opportunity for economic achievement. The hallmark of the first half of 19th century America was growth, growth in “three dimensions: population, territory, and economy…. Americans had… quadrupled the size of their country by settling, conquering, annexing, or purchasing territory that had been occupied for millennia by Indians and claimed by France, Spain, Britain, and Mexico.”4 The westward trek bought millions west of the Appalachians. “From 1815 to 1850 the population of the region west of the Appalachians grew nearly three times as fast as the original thirteen states.”5 The Promised Land awaited; Americans were coming to claim their Manifest Destiny.

At the time of “the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the population of the United States was about the same as Ireland’s…. [By 1855] the United States surpassed Britain to become the most populous nation in the Western world save Russia and France…. [The] country contained nearly thirty-two million people, four million of them slaves.”6

A transportation revolution took place after 1815. Roads, canals, steamboats, trains, telegraph “refashioned the economy… [and] made possible a division of labor and specialization of production for ever larger and more distant markets…. The process of making

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4 Ibid., 6.
6 Ibid., 9.
a product (shoes or furniture, for example), which had previously been performed by one or a few skilled craftsmen, was broken down into numerous steps each requiring limited skills and performed by a separate worker. Sometimes the worker did his task with hand tools, but increasingly with the aid of power-driven machinery.”

The urban population “grew three times faster than the rural population from 1810 to 1860... from 6 percent to 20 percent of the total.” Per capita income doubled. There was a new entrepreneurial class called “merchant capitalists” or “Industrialists, “and a new, prosperous, middle class. Though “both rich and poor enjoyed rising incomes, their inequality of wealth widened significantly.” By 1860, roughly half of the non-slave labor force was dependent on wage labor and subject to new forms of capitalist labor discipline.”

Enormous societal changes were taking place: Wage labor and growing economic disparity, new immigration, urbanization. With them came extensive unrest: “Murder, suicide, theft, and mobbing became increasingly common responses to the burdens that liberty and the expectations of gain were placing on people.... Urban rioting became more prevalent.... Street, tavern, and theater rowdiness, labor strikes, and ethnic conflicts – all increased greatly after 1800.”

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8 Ibid., 7.

9 Ibid., 20.

But it was not “so much the level of wages as the very concept of wages itself”\textsuperscript{11} in the pre-Civil war north that evoked riots, criminal activities, and racism. “Wage labor [w]as a form of dependency that seemed to contradict the republican principles on which the country had been founded…. A man dependent on others for a living could never be truly free... Women, children, and slaves were dependent... Wage laborers were also dependent.... Capitalism was incompatible with republicanism.... Dependence on wages robbed a man of his independence and therefore of his liberty. Wage labor was no better than slave labor—hence ‘\textit{wage slavery}.’”\textsuperscript{12} The concept of the white worker, not white farmer or craftsman, but ‘white worker’ arrived in the early nineteenth century, an arrival coinciding with a considerable rise in popular racism in the urban North.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Construction of Whiteness}

The automatic assumption about the new country was that – except for its slave population – it was essentially homogeneous. So that John Jay in the second \textit{Federalist} paper could claim that “Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people; a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion very similar in their manners and customs.”\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{thebibliography}{**}
\bibitem{11}McPherson, \textit{Battle Cry of Freedom}, 23.
\bibitem{12}Ibid.
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There were some German immigrants early on; and nativist organizations formed in the United States prior to the Revolution for the purpose of making Americans of the non-Anglo-Protestant immigrants. Benjamin Franklin and an Anglican minister, William Smith, founded the *Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge among Germans* in the mid-eighteenth century for the “Anglicization” of Pennsylvania’s large German population. Many in these groups responded, by adopting “the American English language... [and] the American belief in liberty... they even began to alter their surnames. Among Pennsylvania Germans, for example, Zimmermann became Carpenter and Rittinghuysen was changed to Rittenhouse, while among the Huguenots, Paul Revere’s surname reflects a change from the French Rivoire.”

“Before 1840 three-quarters of the immigrants were Protestants, mainly from Britain.... [But as] immigration increased six fold during the next two decades... two-thirds of the new immigrants were Catholics from Ireland and Germany [and] the percentage of... unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, mainly Irish,... jumped to nearly half of the total.”

The Promise of America is a religious promise. The sufferer of *ressentiment* in our culture does not reject the Promise; for him there was no other game in town. Instead, he seeks to maintain his status by denying the American Promise to those whom he defines as “the other,” not real Americans. He expresses contempt for “the other” at the same time that he seeks to make their “otherness” permanent; and he expresses hate especially toward those whom he fears will take away his automatic, privileged status.

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Promise Threatened and Reaction

This section first discusses the stigmatization of successive immigrant groups, then addresses racism, the first and longest lasting denial of American legitimacy, and concludes with a discussion of the prevalence of ressentiment in our culture today.

The formative period of the construct of working-class whiteness, the self-definition of white workers as “white,” was in the first 65 years of the nineteenth century when the concept of “whiteness” became a badge of privilege. It “was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline. As the US working class matured, principally in the North, within a slaveholding republic,” the myth of American exceptionalism was hard to maintain. “The white working class, made anxious by fear of dependency, began during its formation to construct an image of the black population”17 as well as new, immigrant workers as “other,” as not capable of being “American.” “There was a pushing down on the vulnerable bottom strata of society, even when there was little to be gained, except psychologically, from such a push. The basic strength of this ideology... lay in the assurance it provided the whites --who constantly feared downward mobility – that no matter what else they may lose, they could never lose their whiteness.”18

18 Ibid., 59.
White workers sought to maintain their status despite the fact that they might be doing the same, or similar, work as African Americans. Though whites worked as hired hands, they considered themselves independent Americans and not to be compared with slave labor. They sought to distinguish themselves from African Americans by new distinctions in language. Roediger quotes Webster’s 1829 *Dictionary of American English* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* to show how language evolved to reinforce the distinction. In Webster’s dictionary the synonym for the term “hireling” is “prostitute.” In the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) a “hireling” is “one who is hired or serves for wages” and the dictionary specifies it as “opprobrious.” The observation was that “those who labor for others become ‘mere Negroes [growing] lazy, and careless.’”19 So there was a gradual change in usage from “hireling” to the term “wage labor.” For Tom Paine “freedom [was] destroyed by dependence and servant was an opprobrious term.”20 And so, “Help Wanted” replaced “Servant Wanted.” And one’s superior in the workplace was no longer called “Master,” with its demeaning reference to slave/master. The Dutch term ‘Boss” was used instead.21 In all these instances, the goal was to differentiate white hired workers from slave labor to maintain the independent, republican image of the American worker.

And the adoption of “whiteness,” a requirement for being part of the American dream, was denied to successive groups of immigrants. A large number of Irish came to the United

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19Ibid., 45.

20Ibid.

21Ibid., 45-54. I use Roediger’s discussion of substitution of words but do not quote him directly.
States in the early years of the nineteenth century. With the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s, the influx grew to a flood, making for approximately three million Irish immigrants in the first half of the century. Americans had never before experienced a foreign influx so big and of such distressing quality. Most Irish were peasants, unskilled and unlearned, and, to American citizens, much worse than that, they were Catholic. “To be called ‘Irish’ was not much better than to be called ‘nigger’; racist commentary made little distinction... [between them, and] Anti-Catholicism was an essential ingredient in American nativism.”

In the years before the Civil War, according to Roediger, the Catholic Irish “race” was called “low-browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual.” Some writers suggested that “the Irish were part of a separate caste or a ‘dark’ race, possibly originally African.... [and] the Census Bureau [which] regularly collected statistics on the nation’s ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ populations,... kept the Irish distinct from even the latter group.”

The Irish and African Americans both lived in urban ghettos in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Chicago. The Irish competed for housing and jobs with blacks, and suffered similar contempt and discrimination. Job postings stated “‘No Irish Need Apply’... An 1853 New York Herald Tribune advertisement read... ‘WOMAN WANTED to do general housework any country or color will answer except Irish.”

The Irish undertook dangerous jobs “in which ...

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23 Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 133.
24 Ibid., 148.
[they] substituted for slaves;”25 the work was called “nigger work.” The relation with African Americans, for the most part, “represented a clash of two ‘cultures of poverty,’ existing side by side, both of them alienated from America's mainstream.”26

Prominent American public figures, such as Francis Amasa Walker, the head of the Census for many years and subsequent president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, claimed that “the immigration of allegedly inferior peoples such as the Irish brought with it a threat of racial degeneration to the US population… [the native-born would] limit their own family size.” Many feared that ‘race suicide’ of good American stock would result.

But the Irish became “white;” they lost the stigma over time as they achieved a higher socio-economic status and, more especially, as they were replaced by other “non-white” immigrant groups. With the massive immigration of southern and eastern Europeans, in the late 1890s to 1924, “the Irish [according to Walker] had... magically assimilated into the ‘American race.’ The Anglo-Saxon fortress suddenly had a jerrybuilt Celtic wing... [and the new immigrants were] the new inferior people beaten men of beaten races.... Immigration of [the new] inferior peoples remained a ‘contact so foul and loathsome’ that it had to be avoided.”27

Theoretically, after the abolition of slavery the oppressed groups, white and black, could have united to claim equal rights, equal pay, better housing opportunities, better

25 Ibid.
26 Lawrence J. McCaffrey, “Irish America,” 78-93.
schools, and removal of legal, racist restrictions. It did not happen that way in this country. “When poor, often immigrant, whites were so desperate for work that they displaced or joined black workers in doing... [low-level, possibly dangerous and filthy work], they were referred to as ‘white niggers,’”28 This did not result in unity or fellow feeling. Roediger says that historians have “managed to unearth but one example of black/white unity during a strike in the entire history of the antebellum North. Instead, it could produce a desire for color bars at work in order to disassociate jobs from black workers, and could generate a militant insistence on being treated as white, rather than as a slave, or even as Irish.”29

Industry pitted group against group. Races were played against each other. “The 1911 Immigration Commission report’s conclusion... [was] that Southern Italians were ‘the most inefficient of races’..... When a mine superintendent on the Iron Range in Minnesota told a government investigator prior to World War I that ‘The black races cannot do the work in three days that a white man can do in one,’ the term ‘black’ connoted Montenegrins, Serbs, Southern Italians, Greeks, and Croats, not African Americans.”30

And African Americans

As immigrant groups were joined by more recent immigrants, the older ones found it easier to be considered “white.” But it is harder for African Americans to lose the stigma of “the other.” There has been neither equal opportunity, nor equal outcome. In the period

28Ibid., 87.
29Ibid.
30Ibid., 97.
after Reconstruction government and industry colluded in ensuring that African Americans did not have equal opportunity. As stated by Olson in ‘Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics:’

Capitalists in primary industries such as mining and agriculture insisted on a repressive labor system structured by race, while white workers (especially unskilled ones) demanded that the state reserve certain areas of employment for them.... The implicit alliance between capitalists and white workers reduced [white] class conflict. White labor repressed black labor in the workplace and the community and excluded the latter from full participation in the labor movement. In turn, elites granted white workers higher wages and sundry “public and psychological wages,’ such as the right to vote, to enjoy public accommodations, to live wherever one could afford, and the full benefits of American citizenship.

The American racial order... has historically been constituted by a cross-class alliance between capital and a section of the working class...... Such an alliance constrains conflict within the dominant "white" group because its operation demands the tacit consent of an overwhelming number of that group.... Prior to the civil rights movement, whiteness was a form of racialized standing that guaranteed public recognition of all whites through the legal or customary denial of standing to those who were not white.31

I won’t provide a history of the treatment of African Americans in our country; the paper will address just a few of the legal and institutional racist practices in this country in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as illustrations of continuing discrimination.

- The Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration “financed more than $120 billion worth of new housing between 1934 and 1962 but less than 2 percent of this real estate was available to non-white families... most... in segregated areas.

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• In Houston, Texas—where blacks make up slightly more than one quarter of the local population—more than 75 percent of municipal garbage incinerators and 100 percent of the city-owned garbage dumps are located in black neighborhoods” [Penalties by the EPA for polluters of sites near the white areas were] 500 percent higher than... [those] imposed on polluters in minority areas—an average of $335,566... to $55,318.

• [A 1988 Federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry survey of families with incomes under $6,000 per year determined that] 36 percent of white children but 68 percent of black children suffered from excess lead in the blood streams.

• [In the Los Angeles area] 34 percent of whites inhabit areas with the most polluted air... [but] 71 percent of African Americans... live in neighborhoods with the highest levels of air pollution.

• A 1989 study by the Parents’ Resource Institute for Drug Education discovered that African American high school students ... [had] lower levels of drug and alcohol use than... [whites; though African Americans comprise] about 12 percent of the US populations, blacks accounted for 10 percent of drug arrests in 1984, 40 percent in 1988, and 42 percent in 1990.... [And] sentences for African Americans in the federal prison system [were] 20 percent longer than those given to whites who commit the same crime.

• The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study showed that black and Latino mortgage applicants are 60 percent more likely to be turned down for loans that whites, even after controlling for employment, financial and neighborhood characteristics. 

• Recent data show... that much of black progress is a myth. In many respects, African-Americans are doing no better than they were when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and uprisings swept inner cities across America. Nearly a quarter of African-Americans live below the poverty line today, approximately the same percentage as in 1968. The black child poverty rate is actually higher now than it was then. Unemployment rates in black communities rival those in Third World countries. 

And, in some cases, policies designed to provide greater opportunity for poor Americans have resulted in greater oppression for African Americans due to the way the policies were administered. An example follows:

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The Housing and Urban Development Act... [HUD, in 1968] allowed private lenders to shift the risks of financing low-income housing to the government... One section of the 1968 bill authorized FHA [Federal Housing Authority] mortgages for inner-city areas that did not meet the usual eligibility criteria, and another section subsidized interest payments by low-income families.... As a U.S. Commission on Civil Rights investigation later revealed, FHA officials collaborated with blockbusters in financing the flight of low-income whites out of inner-city neighborhoods, and then aided unscrupulous realtors and speculators by arranging purchases of substandard housing by minorities desperate to own their own homes.... [One result was] inflation of housing costs in the inner city by more than 200 percent between 1968 and 1972. Bankers then foreclosed on mortgages of thousands of these uninspected and substandard homes, ruining many inner-city neighborhoods. In response, the department of Housing and Urban development essentially red-lined inner cities, making them ineligible for future loans, a decision that destroyed the value of inner-city housing for generations to come.34

The more recent institutional policies and legislative acts that have resulted in discrimination against African Americans are not recognized as such. They are not labeled as “racist;” and, given our culture of individualism, we do not see the “group” effect of government policy that increases racial inequity. In our current world we only recognize racism when we see “individual manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility.”35

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35 Ibid., 83.
CHAPTER 4
RESSENTIMENT AND NIETZSCHE’S SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

American exceptionalism does not acknowledge the impact of past oppression, unless it is to tout the “overcoming” of it; there is a denial of history, of the long-term impacts of a culture of past abuse. In our Promised Land we all are self-made, with “liberty and justice for all.” According to the myth we start out with the same opportunity. Therefore, lack of achievement is a personal indictment. The assumption is that since discrimination is illegal and everyone has equal rights, what’s the problem? "In one poll 70 percent said that African Americans “have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites…. [And] a National Opinion Research Report in 1990 disclosed than more than 50 percent of U.S. whites viewed blacks as innately lazy and less intelligent and less patriotic than whites.”

Many whites feel themselves victimized by society and blame the policies of those in power for giving unfair advantage to the undeserving. The sufferers of ressentiment feel that they have not attained what is their due and seek to blame. And so we return to the discussion of ressentiment.

Recent Ressentiment

“In... the past the country appeared to be threatened by people who want to take it away from ‘us.’ The assumption was that the country belongs to ‘us,’ is us. The new assumption... is quite different: ‘They’ have in fact taken the country away from us, and ‘we’ no longer belong.” Cambridge, Massachusetts elected the nation’s first black lesbian mayor in 2008. “Dallas County, Tex., elected a Latina lesbian sheriff in 2004 (and re-elected her ... [in 2008] and... the three serious candidates for mayor of Houston... [in the fall of 2009] include[d] a black man and a white lesbian.”

1 Ibid., 82.


The sense of entitlement is thwarted and rage results, a diminution of self-worth. White privilege still exists; in some cases – as in the disproportionate treatment of whites and blacks in drug related cases – it has recently increased. But the government no longer officially supports it. Though on every significant measure – education, longevity, wealth, employment, whites do better than African Americans, “whites can no longer expect the state to ensure their personal standing.... This situation creates insecurity, as well as anger toward those perceived as responsible for it. Specifically, it produces ressentiment. “4

The hate, according to Charles Blow, is “theological. For the detractors, truth is no longer dependent on proof because it’s rooted in faith,” faith that the “other,” however, defined, has betrayed the Promise of America: The President, the democrats, the gays, supporters of increased taxes on the rich, supporters of the 2010 Health Act. The United States offered the white, Protestant, Anglo-American a Promise in this world and a hope in the afterworld: “‘America’ as a synonym for human possibility... For the metaphor ... portraits the American ideology... in the transcendent colors of utopia.”6 Many who came in later migrations believed in the Promise.

The sense of nostalgia for the mythical past is overpowering, a desire to return to the simpler world of the American dream. “The very act of identifying... [the evils of our current society] becomes an appeal for cohesion.... To denounce a king through precepts derived from

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6 Bercovitch, The Rites of Assent, 367.
the divine right of kings is to define government itself as monarchical; just as to denounce immoral Christians by contrast with the sacred example of Christ is to Christianize morality.”7 And to define as un-American the exercise of power by minorities or homosexuals is to consecrate what it means to be an American.

Bred in the American exceptionalism and religious entitlement of this country, the sufferer cannot turn against the values he sees embodied in the successful “other”. He has to blame the system (big government, legal support for gay rights) and turn the envy and hate into pride over the lesser. Early on in our history feelings of self-worth were enhanced by dehumanization of the slave. Then, when slavery ended, and the officially dehumanized were (at least theoretically) free, the ressentiment flowered against a perceived relationship between those who wielded power and those who were no longer officially dehumanized. The anger encompassed both sides.

The Tea Party phenomenon is a recent manifestation of ressentiment. It is an expression of the increasing ideological polarization in the United States and the fear that the country is no longer “ours.” According to U.S. Census Bureau forecasts, by 2050 white, non-Hispanics will be 50% of the population.

The New York Times in April, 2010, conducted a poll of Tea Party supporters in comparison with the general public. Tea Party supporters were “wealthier and more well-educated than the general public .... The 18 percent of Americans who identified themselves

7 Ibid.
as Tea Party supporters [at the time of the Poll] tend[ed] to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45.” And eighty-four percent of the Tea Party respondents believed that their movement generally reflected the views of most Americans; only 8 percent of other respondents agreed with this assessment at the time the poll was taken.

Ninety-two per cent of the Tea Party supporters said that the President's policies are moving the country toward socialism. Over half thought that “in recent years... too much has been made of the problems facing black people.” In the poll 56 percent said that the policies of the Obama administration favor the poor over the rich and middle class, and 73 percent said that providing “benefits to poor people encourages them to remain poor.” One quarter of Tea Party respondents thought that the administration favors blacks over whites — compared with 11 percent of the general public. Over half said that global warming will have no serious impact.

The percentage of Tea Party supporters may have increased from the 18 percent identified in April, 2010, given their political success and the dreadful state of the economy. They, more than most of the population, support the traditional values of the American myth:

A sense of election (Puritan), a myth of exclusive genealogical descent (Anglo-Saxon), a set of cultural boundary markers ('WASP'), a territory (United States/Frontier), a lifestyle representation (Yeoman) and a communal Golden Age (Jefferson's Republic)

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10 Ibid.
to which the group... [sought] to return. Together, these elements formed the myth-symbol complex of the "American" ethnie [race].

The sense of election has not been fulfilled; (we need to take America back); the exclusive genealogical descent had been diluted, (the fear and expectation is that it will be even more so in the future); White Anglo-Saxon Protestants are not longer a privileged group, (with an African American president); the independent yeoman farmer living under the “least government” does not exist (the fear is the government is not only ‘too big,’ but turning socialist); and what remains is nostalgia for a mythical past.

The ressentiment at the loss of the Promise of America, manifest by the Tea Party movement, is deep-seated and genuine. Glenn Reynolds in the New York Post characterized it as “a genuine popular protest movement” by a group that normally does not protest.

These aren't the usual semiprofessional protesters who attend antiwar and pro-union marches. These are people with real jobs; most have never attended a protest march before. They represent a kind of energy that our politics hasn't seen lately, and an influx of new activists that we're seeing today.

But though the expression is genuine, the Tea Party adherents, with their outpouring of “grassroots patriotism” are being supported and manipulated by corporate power.

Nietzsche calls the leaders of ressentiment “the priests,” those who marshal the hate and spite

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to give it focus and redirect it. In this instance, the concentration of the hate and envy profits those who manipulate it: The priests or “corporate funders.”

At a training session for Tea Party activists held over the July 4th weekend, 2010, “a series of speakers denounce[ed] President Barack Obama. Peggy Venable... the organizer of the summit, warned that Administration officials ‘have a socialist vision for this country’.... An advertisement cast the event as a populist uprising against vested corporate power. ‘Today, the voices of average Americans are being drowned out by lobbyists and special interests,’ it said. ‘But you can do something about it.’”\(^\text{13}\)

But the Americans for Prosperity Foundation that sponsored the event was founded by David Koch in 2004, a prime exemplar of corporate power. He is one of the two principal owners of Koch Industries, the second largest private company in the United States, according to Forbes magazine. The company “operates oil refineries in Alaska, Texas and Minnesota, and controls some four thousand miles of pipeline.... The Kochs are longtime libertarians who believe in drastically lower personal and corporate taxes, minimal social services for the needy, and much less oversight of industry – especially environmental regulation.”\(^\text{14}\) A study by University of Massachusetts at Amherst’s Political Economy Research named Koch industries


\(^\text{14}\) Ibid.
as “one of the top ten air polluters in the United States. And Greenpeace issued a report identifying the company as a ‘kingpin of climate science denial.’”\textsuperscript{15}

David Koch, in a New York magazine interview stated that he does not know if global warming is a reality but, if so, he thinks it a good thing as “The Earth will be able to support enormously more people because a far greater land area will be available to produce food.”\textsuperscript{16} In the same article, Koch praised the Tea Party: “‘It demonstrates a powerful visceral hostility in the body politic against the massive increase in government power, the massive efforts to socialize this country, which goes against the conservative grain of the average American.’”\textsuperscript{17}

Venable, at the Americans for Prosperity event, spoke effulgently of the Tea Party movement: “‘We love what the Tea Parties are doing, because that’s how we’re going to take back America!’” In the same article Mayer quotes Ted Cruz, “a former solicitor general of Texas... [who] told the crowd that Obama was ‘the most radical President ever to occupy the Oval Office,’ and had hidden from voters a secret agenda—‘the government taking over our economy and lives.’” Cruz called the fight against Obama “‘the epic fight of our generation;’” and he quoted the rallying cry of the Alamo “‘Victory, or death!’”\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Jane Mayer, “Covert Operations,” The New Yorker, August 30, 2010.
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The grounds for *ressentiment*, according to Nietzsche, are existential; i.e., the transience of existence. The specifics, in any particular manifestation, are embedded in the perspective of the sufferers. In our country, now, some want to take the country back to the mythical, nostalgic American past, an expression of the visceral hostility in the body politics to the perceived direction of the country. The present and future are too frightening. The *ressentiment* represents a popular, libertarian strain in our country that is being manipulated and exacerbated by those who may share it, but who also profit from it, whom Jane Mayer calls the “corporate funders,” or in Nietzsche’s terms the priests of the *ressentiment*. They present a “narrative that nourishes, harnesses, and then re-directs the anger…. [but] does nothing to take away the conditions that feed this resentment.”\(^{19}\)

Nietzsche speaks of the manipulator of *ressentiment* as the ascetic priest who “combats only the suffering itself, the discomfiture of the sufferer, not its cause, not the real sickness.”\(^{20}\) Every sufferer, according to Nietzsche, “instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering, [someone or something to blame] some living thing on which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects…. to win relief… to deaden pain of any kind.”\(^{21}\)

The sufferer seeks to blame. One’s identity, one’s sense of self, is in jeopardy; the sufferer has lost his way in a world he cannot control, does not understand, and finds

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21 Ibid., sec. 15, 127.
threatening. He cannot overcome it. The ascetic priest cleverly “alters the direction of [the] ressentiment [and finds] a focus for the release of anger and emotion. The result is a toxic construction of self-identity,” where the individual regains his self-respect through the creation of an external enemy, who threatens to destroy his identity, and who serves as a “focal point for popular rage.... [The ressentiment] provide[s] affirmations of self, cathartic rituals in which one can feel good about oneself by externalizing the threat to self, which then becomes a target of rage. What we are dealing with here is a form of politics as resentment,” manipulated by “ascetic priests” who direct the outpouring of rage, thereby relieving the suffering, and profiting from the result.

Nietzsche’s philosophy does not allow for a sense of ressentiment. It is a hard philosophy; there is no promise and no one to blame. In contradistinction to Nietzsche, the myth of American exceptionalism offers hope and redemption. In place of Nietzsche’s concept of necessity is the concept of the individual, a new Adam with an unlimited future, limited only by lack of effort; instead of Eternal Recurrence and the primacy of the moment, there is an open-ended future with unending progress in a new world; instead of the sense of historicism and perspectivism is the idea of the chosen people, who have thrown off the yoke of the past to create themselves anew; instead of the Death of God there is a deep belief in a God, a God who looks with favor on the new, chosen people in the new land – the chosen


23 Ibid.
people being primarily white Anglo-Saxon males. The American myth also allows for the development of *ressentiment* when the Promise is unfulfilled and the dream denied.

The story that I have told is not the only true story about out inherited vision of America. The myth of American exceptionalism has served many well. Waves of immigrants who came here adopted the myth. For many, their sense of limitation was overcome by their hope for the future and the expectation that the promise of the American dream would be realized by their offspring. The myth of equality of opportunity and ‘liberty and justice for all’ resonates with the public; it has served to mitigate legal, institutional racism. The Promise of America has “allowed Martin Luther King, Jr., the grandson of slaves, to mobilize the Civil Rights movement on the grounds that racism is un-American.”

However, that element of the society suffering from *ressentiment* can only be satisfied by recreating an illusion of a mythic past: Strong, impregnable Christian America with an unlimited future dominated by white males. Nostalgia creates a false America that never was and cannot be constructed; it provides the sufferers of *ressentiment* the pleasure of blaming others for destroying their make-believe world.

**Nietzsche on Responsibility and Blame**

And for Nietzsche this blame is the defense of weaklings who cannot accept the basic human condition, the reality of limit and the transience of existence. For these very limits - the concepts of necessity, perspectivism and eternal recurrence provide the possibility of

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freedom and responsible action. The universe is indifferent to us; we are thrust for a short time into a time and place not of our choosing, with pre-existing structures and morality. But given that there are no moral absolutes, no over-arching institutional structures or accepted norms that we need accede to, we have the freedom to overcome and to determine our response in a pre-existing, indifferent world.

Necessity does not mean that every future act is inevitable; rather, everything that has happened cannot have occurred otherwise. Where we are in the moment is the inevitable outcome of what came before, the inevitable result of all that preceded it. But in the moment we exercise our Will to Power and can determine our actions. Or, rather, we don’t exercise our Will to Power – our Will to Power expresses us; i.e., who we are.

And how do we become who we are? And overcome the dead weight of institutions and tradition? The we is individual; it is not collective. For Nietzsche responsibility lies with the individual; society is only an impediment. Society represents a herd mentality. The responsible individual is not ensnared by the herd morality of a totalitarian society; he creates his own morality. He strives for individual excellence, for the embodiment of an aesthetic element in life. In his hope for the coming of the future overman, Nietzsche states that the overman, “create[s] meaning and value in a world from which all transcendent supports have fallen away, ... give[s] unique shape to... [his] immediate inclinations, drives, and passions;
interpret[s], prune[s], and enhance[s] according to a unifying sensibility, a ruling instinct, that brings everything into a whole that satisfies.”

Nietzsche’s sense of individual conscience and responsibility is not set forth systematically in his work. Recurrent themes that play throughout his work need to be brought forth to provide a somewhat systematic understanding. As in other areas of Nietzsche’s corpus, to address the concepts in this fashion does Nietzsche an injustice. The breadth of his understanding and expansiveness of his universe are diminished in the attempt, but nonetheless:

- Responsibility focuses on the individual, not society. The superior individual overcomes the constraints of society to exercise his freedom; he creates his own structure and morality

- Totalitarian pressures must be resisted. The structures of society represent the herd mentality of the masses; they act as a totalitarian force that demands concurrence and obedience; they result in a squashing of individual freedom.

- The superior life is an aesthetic whole. The superior person goes beyond tradition to make his life an aesthetic experience.

Responsibility Focuses on the Individual

The rejection of transcendent values and the dismissal of an underlying reality that undergirds appearance provide the opportunity for self-creation, a proposition, as he says, both “truthful and terrible.”

‘The moral man is no closer to the intelligible world than the physical man—for there is no intelligible world’... This proposition...may perhaps one day... serve as the ax

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swing against the ‘metaphysical need’ of mankind... {It is} a proposition of immense consequences, truthful and terrible at the same time, looking into the world with the Janus face which all great insights share.26

There is nothing, therefore, that necessarily limits one’s range or deadens the possibility of self-overcoming and self-making. But it is a truthful and terrible task, a Janus face, for this making of oneself means setting oneself apart from the herd. It involves extreme loneliness, suffering, but, also, joy. And to overcome, says Zarathustra, “one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.”27 The chaos is the basic energy, the force, the thrust of life that Nietzsche calls the Will to Power that allows one to embrace life. It includes the whole human being, not only mind, the rational part. In a sense the person exists only through his exercise of Will to Power. The unity of self is as much body as mind.

Nietzsche’s disgust with Christianity, what he calls the “will to lie... that which corrupted humanity”28 reflects his total rejection of the Christian duality of mind and body, a most destructive aspect of the faith.

The utterly gruesome fact that [with Christian morality] antinature itself received the highest honors as morality... {It} taught men to despise the very first instinct of life... [it] mendaciously invented a ‘soul,’ a ‘spirit’ to ruin the body... [it] taught men to experience the presupposition of life, sexuality, as something unclean... [it] looks for the evil principle in what is most profoundly necessary for growth, in severe self-love.”29

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26 Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, “Human, All too Human” 6, 289.


29 Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, Second Part 20, 139.
Human freedom, the exercise of the Will to Power, is imprisoned, for Nietzsche, by a Christian morality that despises human instinct and human nature. It denies the importance of the body and renders the natural expression of the Will powerless. It provides an unreal answer to the loneliness and suffering that are part of the existential condition.

Consciousness is aware of the inevitability of limit, the reality of closure. For, claims Nietzsche, the “will cannot will backwards... and break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy.” Revenge is the need to make others pay for one’s suffering that cannot be redeemed; it seeks punishment for the suffering of existence.

And the joy, the overcoming of loneliness and suffering is found in the eternal recurrence. Zarathustra speaks of himself as “a bridge to the future.” For, he says, “how could I bear to be a man if man were not also a creator and guesser of riddles and redeemer of accident?” And how is this to be? “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption.” And so, to take responsibility the will has to “become his own redeemer and joy-bringer... [to unlearn] the spirit of revenge.” The concept of eternal recurrence is Nietzsche’s answer to the spirit of ressentiment. “The incapacity to come to terms with the realities of human existence itself” is addressed by Nietzsche not by the futility and destructiveness of ressentiment but by the concept of the eternal return.

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 141.
The burdensome task of the eternal return--understood as the immanent unfolding of a dynamic and finite will to power--will be to render a truthful account of that reality, to articulate the intelligibility, the “thinkability” of this existence, such that it can be humanly comprehended and joyfully embraced, despite the quantum of pain and suffering that is necessarily ingredient to life.33

And so the responsibility of the individual is to embrace life, acknowledge suffering, express the force of existence, the going beyond, through his independent, self-determined Will to Power. To exercise his freedom, the responsible individual must resist the pressure of “herd” mentality, of societal norms; he must do this not through ressentiment but through the celebration of the eternal recurrence.

Totalitarian Pressures Must Be Resisted

Inherited morality imposes sameness, destroys individuation, thwarts the exercise of the Will to Power and prevents the realization of potentiality in the moment between “a past and an undetermined and open future.”34 “Every morality is a piece of tyranny against ‘nature,’ likewise against ‘reason.’”35 There are multiple ways in which this is true.

- Any inherited morality, not self-created, diminishes freedom and the exercise of the Will to Power. There have been many moralities based on the needs of individual communities. In the future there will be new ones. Any inherited morality thwarts individual will – whether the source is the state or the Church.

Morality trains the individual to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only as a function. The conditions for the preservation of different

33 Allison, Reading the New Nietzsche, 126.


35 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, no. 188, 110.
communities were very different; hence there were very different moralities... Morality is herd instinct in the individual.\textsuperscript{36}

- We live in a world in which an especially egregious form of slave morality, Christian morality, has triumphed; this inherited morality is against nature and self. “We cannot believe in God without denying the ‘will to life.’ The Christian concept of devotion, self-sacrifice, and self-renunciation is a denial of who we are as human beings.”\textsuperscript{37}

The Christian conception of God—God as god of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attempted on earth...God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes! God as the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live.... God—the deification of nothingness, the will to nothingness pronounced holy!\textsuperscript{38}

- Societal pressure and individual desire for contentment and belonging derail man’s lonely struggle for creativity and excellence, the proper goals of existence. The search for happiness misdirects the exceptional individual into the herd mentality. It is not only existential suffering that must be overcome but the loneliness and isolation of self-creation. Zarathustra addresses the people and suffers their incomprehension and derision.

“The time has come for man to set himself a goal.... The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest. ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.... No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same; whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse... And now they look at me and laugh: as they laugh they even hate me. There is ice in their laughter.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, Book Three 116, 116-117.


\textsuperscript{39} Nietzsche, \textit{Thus Spake Zarathustra}, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” 5, 17-19.
The Superior Life Is an Aesthetic Whole

For Nietzsche, the redemption of life is through art. For the so-called “‘true world’ of morality is a world of lies... the supersensuous... is an error. The sensuous world...is the true world... But the sensuous, the sense-semblant, is the very element of art. So it is that art affirms what the suppositions of the ostensibly true world denies. ‘Art as the single superior counterforce against all will to negation of life, art as the anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, anti-Nihilist par excellence.’40

The duality of world and spirit, the sense of the “true world” of morality underlying the world of appearance, for Nietzsche, does not exist; the duality of body and mind is a lie. As there is no unifying reality or structure, the world of appearance, the visible world, the world of doing and creating is all that exists. Nietzsche finds the value of existence in the self-creation of the superior person. The independent and strong person is affirmed through the exercise of his Will to Power. And in affirming itself the Will affirms its difference – not its unity with an “other” but its difference among a plurality of possibilities. In the world of appearance we are the actors, the “doers” or rather, the recipients of “the deed,” as “the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”41 And so it is through our exercise of our Will to Power that we create beauty and make meaning. A meaningful life is achieved through the aesthetics of self-creation. For it is only in the aesthetic phenomenon


that existence and the world are eternally justified.”42 And this occurs only in the action and the deed.

Identity is not something that precedes or is separable from action. Only the performing self knows freedom, and only through performance can an otherwise dispersed or fragmented self be gathered together and display its uniqueness. Men become who they are, as Nietzsche would say, through action and the achievement of a distinct style of action.43

Nehamas offers an explanation of how one achieves a unity sufficient for continuity and action, how one “’give[s] style’ to one’s character.”

“Nietzsche... seems to think of it as a continual process of integrating one’s character traits, habits, and patterns of action with one another.... The process is gradual.... The unity Nietzsche has in mind can become apparent and truly exist only over time.... [and] what is achieved at that time is the unification of one’s past with one’s present.”44

But the important understanding for this document is Nietzsche’s sense that a meaningful life is one of self-creation over time. This necessarily involves overcoming, loneliness, and suffering. Suffering is not only part of the human condition; suffering is necessary for the achievement of greatness.

[It is] the discipline of suffering... the tension of the soul in misfortune which cultivates its strength, its terror at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting, exploiting misfortune, and whatever of depth, mystery, mask, spirit, cunning and greatness have been bestowed upon it—has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? 45

42 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, sec. 5, 52.


44 Nehamas, Nietzsche Life As Literature, 187.
And Nietzsche personally experienced much suffering in his life: Physical ailments, failed love, a sense of isolation and a peripatetic existence. But, as Nehamas points out, Nietzsche is an example of the self-overcoming, the self-creative artist who, over time, in his works achieved a sense of unity and the superior sense of life as an aesthetic whole.

One way, then to become one thing, one’s own character, what one is, is, after having written all these other books, to write *Ecce Homo*, end even to give it the subtitle “How One Becomes What One Is.” It is to write this self-referential book in which Nietzsche can be said with equal justice to invent or to discover himself, and in which the character who speaks to us is the author who has created him and who is in turn a character created by or implicit in all the books that were written by the author who is writing this one.46

**Conclusion**

The *overman* that Nietzsche posits does not exist. “It signifies humanity’s capacity for achieving a self-transformation of itself and a fully truthful understanding of the human condition. This can come about, Nietzsche argues, only when humanity is freed from the bitterness, resentment, guilt, and shame brought on by traditional moral doctrine.”47 In our culture, as discussed, *ressentiment* comes not only from the existential condition, not only from the current economic downturn and not only from awareness that we live in a world in which we are losing our sense of exceptionalism, but, from the basic sense that the myth of the American promise has been betrayed.


Nietzsche sets forth an alternative to the cycle of deprivation and blame he sees in society, a way to dispel the *ressentiment*. His alternative, like the *overman*, is also a theoretical construct: The eternal recurrence and the embracing of one’s fate in an uncaring universe. There is no afterlife; there is no essence beneath becoming or appearance. One takes control of one’s life and makes meaning by affirming what is: Through overcoming terror by self-creation; through taking responsibility for all of one’s existence, for one could not be in the moment if all that preceded had not occurred exactly as it did; and through embracing one’s fate.

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it.48

For Nietzsche, the concept of an individual who has been promised fulfillment in this world, and maybe the next, and in its absence is filled with vengefulness and blame is insane. There is no pre-existing self to whom all blessings are due; we experience our world through our actions and make it beautiful.

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