



**PALGRAVE STUDIES IN CLASSICAL LIBERALISM**

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# Nietzsche and the Politics of Reaction

Essays on Liberalism,  
Socialism, and Aristocratic  
Radicalism

*Edited by*  
Matthew McManus

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## Palgrave Studies in Classical Liberalism

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Matthew McManus  
Editor

# Nietzsche and the Politics of Reaction

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Aristocratic Radicalism

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*In the end it must be as it is and always has been: great things remain for  
the great, abysses for the profound, nuances and shudders for the refined,  
and, in brief, all that is rare for the rare.*

*Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil*

*Dedicated to the memories of Michael Brooks, Leo Panitch,  
Diana Hollands and all the others lost during the devastating past few years*

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as a whole owes an unpayable debt to the frontline workers and specialists who even now are fighting against the ravages of COVID19, which looked for a while like it might bring society as a whole to its knees. Everyone from the nurses and doctors to the grocery store clerks and warehouse workers kept us afloat when the ship of state was sinking, and hopefully your contribution will not be forgotten. And finally we offer a tremendous amount of love and sympathy to our families and friends around the world for all they do for us. Who knows where we would have wound up without all of you? We can only hope you'll forgive us our distractions.

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# Introduction

Matt McManus

Liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained: later on, there are no worse and no more thorough injurers of freedom than liberal institutions. Their effects are known well enough: they undermine the will to power; they level mountain and valley, and call that morality; they make men small, cowardly, and hedonistic — every time it is the herd animal that triumphs with them. Liberalism: in other words, herd-animalization.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

I first read Nietzsche when I was 18 years old and picked up a copy of *Twilight of the Idols* at a chapters in downtown Ottawa. At the time my Catholic faith was in critical condition, and sensibly enough I just

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figured the solution was to read a few philosophy books, pick the right one, and then believe in that. In other words, I was the perfect candidate to have my pretensions and aspirations wiped clean by the Anti-Christ. Reading Nietzsche for the first time is rather like reaching the summit of a very high mountain, and finding yourself struck by the withdrawn heavens above and the fathomless chasm below. The simultaneous feeling of insignificance in the face of magnificence and the sheer power of one's will is an intoxicating contradiction you can never fully wean yourself of.

And lord, how different Nietzsche was from many of the drab, analytical, and cautious people we had to read at school. We were all taught the importance of careful analysis, constant fidelity to sacred texts, veneration of intellectual authority, and wisdom. And so we all wrote measured, temperate, and flawlessly cited articles dealing with this or that area of scholarship or concern. In grad school we doubled down on all these trends, learning that our job was to carve out a tiny niche of expertise and pump out as many articles as possible for the 100 (at best) or so readers who happened to care about the same subject. And yet here was the most important philosopher of the era, whose books were full of jokes, mockingly unfair and cruel put-downs of his opponents, gigantic and thoroughly untestable hypotheses linking the history of philosophy, theology, politics, and morality into a seamless expanse of intellectual brilliance. He broke every rule under the sun and made it look oh so necessary.

At the time the dominant political interpretation of Nietzsche in the academy tended to divide in two. Either one thought of Nietzsche as a largely apolitical cultural commentator who was chiefly famous for endorsing a kind of bohemian existential individualism. Many of us who were weaned on Walter Kaufmann's seminal English translations and introductions to Nietzsche came away with this take. Then there was Nietzsche the post-modernist, who was a much more political thinker but not in the direct way one might expect. This take on Nietzsche transformed him into a proto-leftist radical—at least by the expectations of the era—who criticized every flavor of conservative and bourgeois moralism and exposed it as the discursive cloak for all forms of power. The post-structuralist Nietzsche was a forerunner of the Deleuzian

philosophy of “difference-in-itself” or of Foucauldian genealogy; simultaneously exposing the squares and opening new intellectual spaces for a diverse array of experiments in self-hood.

Of course many of us were aware that once upon a time Nietzsche had been taken to be the philosopher of fascism and Nazism, with no less an icon than Bertrand Russell writing a mocking expose in his gigantic *A History of Western Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> But the kind of people who made those claims in the twentieth century were the same sorta weirdos who argued Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party in the twenty-first. In other words no one to take seriously, and scandalously irreverent toward a great thinker who was well known for his measured and respectful interpretations of the opposition. So imagine our surprise when a litany of right and far right authors not only claimed to be inspired by Nietzsche, but elevated him to the status of a major intellectual limelight. How could they possibly think a man who wrote such paeans to democratic equality as “...the great majority of men have no right to life, and serve only to disconcert the elect among our race; I do not yet grant the unfit that right. There are even unfit peoples” would vote for anyone but Bernie Sanders and spend his spare time retweeting #MeTOO? And yet the more you thought about it, the more disturbing sense it made. One recalled how often the eyes lazily glazed past Nietzsche’s seemingly endless references to the irredeemable inferiority of the “herd,” his constant put-downs of women and the effeminate, and the biting contempt for anything that stank to him of weakness or dependence. How we simply ignored his routine jabs at liberalism, socialism, and democracy and the accompanying wishes for an empowered aristocratic caste to put the masses back in their place. In the many places where he called out demands for equality and shared political power as manifestations of sick resentment and a yearning to destroy the vital and healthy.

In the 2010s, a wave of new books and interpretations came out discussing this new take on Nietzsche’s “great” politics. This included Ronald Beiner’s *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return*

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<sup>1</sup> In hindsight, given Russell’s undeniably radical pedigrees, we might have given this more credence.

*of the Far Right*, Malcom Bull's *Anti-Nietzsche*, Hugo Drochon's *Nietzsche's Great Politics*, and above all the long-awaited English translation of Domenico Losurdo's epoch-making *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*. Each of these authors came from widely different political backgrounds themselves, ranging from liberals to democratic theorists and outright communists. But they were united in their conviction that a new take on Nietzsche was needed which avoided inaccurately and crudely framing him as a proto-fascist thinker while acknowledging his connection to right-wing politics past and present. This meant taking seriously the critical side of Nietzsche's withering disdain for egalitarian liberalism and socialism, wariness of democracy, and incel-worthy mockery of the feminist movement. And more disturbingly still his positive defense of radical aristocratic hierarchialization (though of a special sort), a "great politics" that exceeded the vitality and grandiosity of Bismarkian realpolitik, and complex but by no means exclusively negative ruminations about war, violence, and the necessity of an underclass and even slavery. As Drochon observed in his *Nietzsche's Great Politics*, much of this went so against the egalitarian grain of liberal political thought that it was often decentralized from his broader thinker. Or people insisted that it was so idiosyncratic it didn't even warrant being characterized as a political philosophy at all. But this is clearly wrong, and indeed, it requires a certain Nietzschean capacity for forgetfulness to simply forget that the contours of liberal political thought are distinctly modern. The idea that all persons are moral equals, and entitled to a say in the laws that govern them, would have struck Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero as astoundingly naive. In this respect Nietzsche may well constitute a return to a darker and more bombastic time in political thought, and the politics he inspires similarly can't be understood or condemned without first grasping them on their own terms.

The essays in this volume are intended as a contribution to this reevaluation. They are by no means uniformly critical of Nietzsche; indeed no one can be exclusively critical of a truly great thinker without closing their eyes to the truth contained within their thought. But they resist the all too understandable temptation to simply brush his politics aside or reduce him to a safe and cuddly liberal or bohemian post-modern. Instead they position him as Nietzsche deserves to be understood: as



the most profound and dark defender of hierarchical reaction in the modern era. Someone whose unique contribution to political thought is precisely that upends so many of the pieties we modern egalitarians take for granted, and compels us to strengthen our resolve in the face of his attack. After all, whatever doesn't kill us will make us stronger!

The book is divided into three sections of unequal length. Part I: "Nietzsche and the Political Right" are the most overtly political of the essays, with each of the authors analyzing either the anti-egalitarian or constructively hierarchical dimensions of Nietzsche's thought, how it inspires the contemporary right, and responding in some detail. Part II: "Nietzsche's Critique of Modernity" examines the all-important topic of Nietzsche's critique of modernity, which all too often has been rather bafflingly interpreted as apolitical in spite of its often explosive connotations. It also situates Nietzschean thought in the context of the contemporary debates between left and right around post-modernism and post-modernity. Finally, Part III: "The Aesthetic Politics of Value" looks at how Nietzsche's thinking broadly impacted political aesthetics, culture, and art. His influence has obviously been profound; appropriately for one who often flirted with the idea of art as a redemptive response to nihilism, Nietzsche has been more influential in art than anywhere else. The essays appraise a number of well-known artistic responses to his philosophy, ranging from the edifying and inspiring to the dark and even evil in the case of Nazi propaganda like *Triumph of the Will*.

# **Nietzsche and the Political Right**



# Nietzsche's Critique of Egalitarian Post-Christianity

Matt McManus

## Introduction

The aristocratic outlook has been undermined most deeply by the lie of equality of souls, and if the belief in the 'prerogative of the majority' makes revolutions and will continue to make them—it is Christianity, let there be no doubt about it, Christian value judgment which translates every revolution into mere blood and crime! Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground against that which is elevated: the Gospel of the 'lowly' makes low.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*

Friedrich Nietzsche occupies an appropriate contrarian position in the history of political thought. Little known in his own lifetime, he since

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became the closest thing philosophy has to a pop-culture phenomenon. This ubiquity is at least partly because figures from across the political and cultural spectrum have found intellectual gold to mine from the bottomless treasury of his thought. Since at least the 1960s the dominant intellectual interpretation of Nietzsche has undoubtedly been his appropriation by a variety of largely progressive post-structuralist thinkers; of whom Deleuze and Foucault are only the most famous and influential.<sup>1</sup> Many of them found a great deal to learn in his genealogical historicism, his account of the associations between (moral knowledge) and power. This came on the heels of Kaufmann's necessary, but stridently a, or even anti-political, take on Nietzsche in the aftermath of his appropriation by Fascist intellectuals like Heidegger<sup>2</sup> prior and during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> These interpretations of Nietzsche as either a bohemian intellectual indifferent to politics, or a proto-Foucauldian theorist of power and difference, have produced a rich literature abounding in creative resources. It is by no means my intention to challenge the legitimacy of this contribution here. Indeed, and truly great thinker will inevitably inspire innovative heresies and wayward children. But as a hermeneutically astute interpretation of Nietzsche himself, they leave much to be desired. So it has increasingly been challenged both at a theoretical level and by events on the ground, leading to necessary a revaluation of Nietzsche's actual politics and its relevance for the contemporary era.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Gilles Deleuze. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983 and Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1975) and Michel Foucault. *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Heidegger. *What is Metaphysics?*, trans. Richard Polt. (New Haven, CN: Yale University, 2014) and Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche: Volume One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1961) and Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche: Volume Three and Four*, trans. David Farrell Krell. (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kaufmann. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Ronald Beiner. *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Alt Right*. (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) and Malcolm Bull. *Anti-Nietzsche*. (London, UK: Verso Press, 2014) and Hugo Drochon. *Nietzsche's Great Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016) and Domenico Losurdo. *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2020).

In this article, I give an interpretation of Nietzsche as a critic of egalitarian post-Christian liberal democracy and socialism. By post-Christianity, I refer to the period of secularization which occurs in the aftermath of the Enlightenment's murder of God, during which egalitarian doctrines Nietzsche saw as a continuation of Christian morality not only survived but flourished. These included liberalism, democracy, and socialism. Nietzsche's response to these doctrines was immeasurably complex, ranging from contemptuous antagonism to genealogical subtlety. But there is no doubt his mature appraisal was that these egalitarian doctrines were contributing to a nihilistic era of life denial which he wanted to see replaced by a more aesthetically meaningful "great politics." This would require a restoration of aristocratic personalities, but of a very different type than were endorsed by the cantankerous defenders of European Ancien regimes. In this respect Nietzsche was a great innovator on the political right, as one of the most probing and insistent critics of traditional hierarchies. Not in the name of equality, but because the traditional hierarchies venerated by lesser reactionary thinkers were dominated by flabby and stupid elites who lacked the capacity to either respond to egalitarian movements or produce the conditions for a truly great politics. What was needed was therefore, as Losurdo put it, an "aristocratic radicalism"—the profound replacement of traditional elites by a ruling caste far more dynamic and even ruthless than crotchety conservatives were ever willing to entertain.

The paper will conclude with an argument that the appeal of aristocratic radicalism to many on the right tells us something important about the nature of reactionary politics. The defining feature of the political right is not, as many of its proponents claim, fundamentally about a commitment to traditionalism or incrementalism. Instead it is a defense of the hierarchical organization. In contexts where it becomes apparent that traditional elites are incapable of maintaining the proper social hierarchies, or countering the influence of egalitarian doctrines and movements, radical aristocratism, and other militant ideas can become increasingly appealing to many on the political right.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This last point has been brilliantly explored by Corey Robin, who points out that oftentimes conservative intellectuals primary reprisals are directed against ruling elites who are perceived

## Part I: The Post-Structuralist Account of Nietzscheanism

### Deleuze's Radicalization of Resentment

Nietzsche's reputation was scandalously dragged through the mud by his shiftless sister, and decades of self-serving Nazi takes. It is deeply unfortunate that many intelligent commentators simply took this interpretation at face value, often motivated by an unpalatable Germanophobia characteristic of the English-speaking world in the early twentieth century. As Drochon reminds us, no less a luminary than Bertrand Russell infamously described World War Two as "Nietzsche's War."<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of him as a proto-Fascist or Nazi thinker—ignoring his anti-nationalism, pan-Europeanism, and disdain for blood and soil politics—has rightly gone the way of many a bad TV sitcom and should be canceled for good. Beyond just being inaccurate, it reductively failed to account for the theoretical innovations in Nietzsche's thinking that

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as incapable of resisting the left. However, Robin's account of the political right as defined by reaction more than anything is problematic in so far as it denies the creative capacity of right-wing thinkers to put forward and defend substantive hierarchical doctrines of their own. There is a sense in which Robin accepts the egalitarian basis of modern political thought as a given, and sees responses to it primarily as a deviation. I think this is incorrect. Especially when interpreting someone like Nietzsche, it is important to remember who insistently he points out that for a great deal of European history the operative assumption was that moral and political inequality was the natural and desirable human situation. Moreover elaborate justifications were given for this position. In some respects Nietzsche's thought can be conceived as a recovery of this position against the egalitarian impulses of modern political thought; though if it is a recovery, it is one profoundly stamped by the philosophical and political context of modernity. And which not only recognizes but is contemptuous of uncreative efforts to simply return to something like the orderly hierarchies of the Aristotelian or Scholastic universes endorsed by more conventional conservatives. Especially since this fails to recognize how the seed of egalitarian nihilism lay dormant in features of Grecian thought, and especially its appropriation by Christian conservative thinkers who failed to recognize how these seeds would always blossom into radically progressive fruit given time. The constructive dimensions of Nietzsche's thought and politics are a dramatic effort to put forward an alternative doctrine which will not fall victim to this tendency. See Corey Robin. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Hugo Drochon. *Nietzsche's Great Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 21.

would be swiftly picked up by generations of more sincerely progressive thinkers. This has led to Nietzsche being rebranded<sup>7</sup> so successfully among philosophers—though not, it might be added, historians<sup>8</sup>—it warrants brief discussion here.

The post-war influence of Nietzsche on existentialism might have led one to suspect his star would wane with the ascendance of the '68 generation which still looms so large over contemporary thought. But this was not the case, since even as the existential and theological dimensions of Nietzsche's thinking were sidelined, his psychology of self-creation and genealogical analyses of power rose to the fore.

For Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche is interpreted as one of the great metaphysicians of difference. Totalizing figures like Hegel and Freud sought to tame the reality of difference within thought through reconciliation in the absolute idea, or pathologizing the emergence of human difference as the sick end—product of universal Oedipal domination only held in check by the sanctions of the bourgeois superego. Nietzsche offered a different viewpoint; one where the free play of differentiated forces instantiated and broke apart to create reality and human subjects.

Moreover, Deleuze's Nietzsche also offered his own, distinctly life-affirming psychology that sought to celebrate difference and resist the resentment-driven efforts to demand conformity. In Deleuze's violent but undoubtedly innovative hands, Nietzsche becomes the ultimate punk philosopher encouraging us to resist conformity and become who we truly are.<sup>9</sup> By the time we get to Deleuze's rather indulgent political work with Felix Guattari, Nietzsche becomes the prophet who says "let the earth become lightness" through the rejection of the "abstract machine, or machines, in the sense of a Platonic idea, transcendent, universal, eternal" that insist on subduing the generative pandemonium of being. This must include all the forms of socio-political and economic control which

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<sup>7</sup> What Losurdo refers to as the "hermeneutics of innocence." See Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2020), p. 998.

<sup>8</sup> The historical influence of Nietzsche on far-right movements is well accounted for by figures like Evans and Paxton. See Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*. (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 39–40 and Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2004), pp. 32–33.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983).

insist on projecting just such a “transcendent” universal form of unitary order onto being to legitimate forms of dominion over humankind and nature.<sup>10</sup>

Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche is self-consciously violent and undoubtedly has the effect of making the anti-Christ sound not a little like a proto-Deleuzian who just happens to write better than the master. So in that respect there is little purpose in moaning about the liberties Deleuze since it was never intended to show faith toward an icon of faithlessness. But it is worth pausing to note that Deleuze ultimately anticipates the move of other left post-structuralists in locating the root of resentment and human psychological sickness in society rather than in the subject. This isn’t true of the Nietzsche book per se, but it is definitely the case by the time we reach *Anti-Oedipus*. This externalization of the roots of human pathology into society and away from the individual and even family, consciously echoing Marx, is politically significant in exonerating the resentful masses of culpability of condemnation for their sickness.<sup>11</sup> It also opens up the possibility of a more democratic kind of politics which could resolve politically what one cannot overcome individually or psychoanalyze away in the clinic. This was of course not the case for Nietzsche for whom the psychological resentment of the masses was incurable. And who also believed politics should once more be the domain of those few who were in fact capable of living free of resentment and who could consequently make a world far more interesting than the cafes and berets of the forthcoming last man. Here we see a fundamental difference between Deleuze and Nietzsche which his violent reading sadly brushes past.

## Nietzsche Contra Foucault

More influential still has been the remarkable use of Nietzsche by Michel Foucault; probably the most important social scientist of the late

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<sup>10</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 510.

<sup>11</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2009).



twentieth century (whatever his personal failings). The importance of Nietzsche for Foucault has been well documented. Cook notes how the Foucault took up Nietzsche's concerns about the "sheep-like qualities of the dominated and the anonymity of domination" and the "levelling<sup>12</sup> and conformist tendencies of the West."<sup>13</sup> Love notes how Foucault "associates his disciplinary approach to power with Nietzsche's notion of politics as relations of force."<sup>14</sup> And Foucault himself was always straightforward about the influence of Nietzsche on his writing, discussing his "importance" during interviews,<sup>15</sup> and famously describing himself as "simply a Nietzschean" shortly before his death. And indeed, the theoretical influence of Nietzsche on Foucault is hard to miss.

In his classic exegesis *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality*, Thomas Lemke distinguishes three major periods in Foucault's thought. Because Foucault is the post-child for post-structuralist Nietzscheanism, I will spend a little bit more space on this.<sup>16</sup> Foucault's first period is an archaeological one, focused on the way myriad discourses of knowledge are arranged and institutionalized, which in turn are mutually constitutive of a grand and dominating episteme which further organizes and dominates. One of Foucault's major advances is to de-objectify discourse and episteme alike through archaeological analysis, which over unveils both the hidden value judgments parasitic on epistemic and moral exclusions. This is of course a deeply Nietzschean move. Nietzsche famously declared how it became clear to him that the "moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ from which the whole plant had grown" and which therefore requires moralistic denunciation

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<sup>12</sup> Though oddly Foucault never provides a constructive account of how resistance to egalitarian policies requiring disciplinary organization can be squared with a progressive politics that aspires to a more equal distribution of productive power in society. Part of these difficulties lie in Foucault's well known unwillingness to provide an explicit political or moral project which might try to account for these tensions in a productive rather than purely critical fashion.

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Cook. *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 2018), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy S Love *Marx, Nietzsche, and Modernity*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault. *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Lemke. *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason*. (London, UK: Verso, 2019).

and suppression of alternative views in the name of beatific “truth.” You can see much of this disposition to suspicion in Foucault’s archaeological period, along with an already well-defined approach to the historical situatedness of thinking and the ways it is instantiated socially.<sup>17</sup>

Foucault’s second period is a more distinctly “genealogical” one. This is not so much a break with the archaeological period as a shift in focus, looking at how thought becomes ideated and legitimated through material processes of power rather than how knowledge is assembled and then impacts things on the ground. The defining work of the period is of course *Discipline and Punish*, which remains easily the Foucault book even people who don’t read Foucault know about. This period foregrounds the impact of power far more prominently. It becomes clear that Foucault’s analysis of the transition from sovereign violence to modern discipline entails a damning and sweeping critique of modernity’s conceit to have transcended the vulgar exercise of power through law and polyarchic democracy. Instead of liquidating power, a genealogical analysis of the transition from the Ancien regime to modernity shows how it in fact changed form. Rather than targeting the body of a criminal, in line with the antiquarian conception of instilling awe toward sovereignty and emancipating the soul from its sinful shell, modern power sought to remake the soul wholesale. Often in line with the new, profane Enlightenment paradigm stressing economic production and the morality of labor and personal striving for gratification.<sup>18</sup> Bringing about such a disciplining of the soul required new forms of institutionalized power to be applied to human beings, who were in turn reconceived by law and discourse as universal bourgeois subjects. The most famous example is the growth of the modern state and its bureaucracy, which assumed a greater and greater role in shaping the development of individuals over time to fulfill their role in an increasingly complex and global system through education, biopolitical management, and more.

What is genealogical about Foucault’s analysis is its relentless determination to avoid moralizing or even ascribing a teleological gloss to his

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Here the distinctions between Nietzsche and Foucault’s respective evaluations of modernity become important, as I will discuss shortly.

critique of modernity. The latter was of course emblematic of the vulgar Marxism and Hegelianism pervasive in mid-century French thought, and which Foucault himself seemed determined to run away from. More methodologically complex—and this is a problem for Nietzsche's genealogy as well—is the question of its objectivity. Herein we find a well-known paradox, which is whether an anti-foundationalist and suspicious philosophy so successful it delegitimizes all its competitors can resist having its own theoretical weapons turned against it. If all forms of knowledge are mutually emergent with associated forms of power what of the knowledge produced by archaeological and genealogical analysis? Putting aside this important issue, the genealogical method employed by Foucault was obviously intended by him to create new conceptual weapons to resist forms of disciplinary power. Though this brought us to the key normative questions of for what, for whom, and above all why? As we will see Nietzsche himself answered: in the name of the aristocratic overman who is to repudiate much of the Christian legacy and its Enlightenment offshoots. But ironically Foucault's own leftist sympathies seem more than a little reminiscent of the projects of Enlightenment egalitarianism he criticizes; especially his interest in emancipating marginalized forms of subjectivities from the auspices of disciplinary power.

This was made more explicit in Foucault's third and final phase, which both echoed and contrasted Nietzsche in emphasizing an "ethic" of self-creation linked to both an emancipatory politics and a renewed emphasis on the creative potential of the body. This brought things full circle in giving Foucault and explicitly constructive project that seemed a lot like Nietzsche's aestheticized veneration of the overman who becomes what he is. But it breaks with Nietzsche in its fundamentally ethical belief that such opportunities for self-creation must be available to the many rather than the rarefied few. The only way to purchase this egalitarianism is to take the fundamentally anti-Nietzschean step of locating the barriers to self-creation primarily in the forms of knowledge/power and governmentality that constrain us. This is very different than Nietzsche who was attentive to these dimensions, but was also convinced to the core that many of the herd were pathologically incapable of ever reaching

such levels.<sup>19</sup> Indeed Nietzsche often wrote as though the egalitarian ambition of providing equal opportunity and freedom to all—which Foucault was not only committed to but in fact sought to radicalize—was a positive cultural barrier to the self-assertion of the rarefied few. For Nietzsche, it was long past time to accept that society could not be rearranged to produce interesting forms of self-creation from the psychologically resentment driven and sick masses. So it should be reformed for the convenience of healthy radical aristocratism. Perhaps it was an understandable unwillingness to go down this road that led Foucault to reject even the Deleuzian reinterpretations of Nietzschean psychology<sup>20</sup> and just go straight back to the muscular egalitarianism of Kantian Enlightenment.<sup>21</sup> After all: the heart wants what the heart wants.

## Why Its Time to Give up the Post-Structuralist Reading

For many leftists, especially those weaned on post-structuralism, to be politically radical means to be interesting. Consequently Nietzsche, who is supremely interesting, must be a radical. And he was. Just not a left-wing radical. It is this uncomfortable fact that the post-structuralist reading of Nietzsche has heaved mightily to avoid. And it is time for us to face up to the equally uncomfortable fact that they failed dramatically. This hasn't been without consequence.

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<sup>19</sup> This reflects Foucault's well-known antipathy toward psychological forms of evaluation, which may have been healthy as an initial response to the dominance of psychoanalysis, but went too far in the other direction. This isn't to suggest we should cede to Nietzsche the conviction that some people are psychologically incapable of engaging in these projects of genuine self-creation, even in an emancipated context. Instead we need a new kind of radical psychology that incorporates Foucauldian lessons. Steps in that direction have been taken by Wendy Brown. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). And even more prominently by Judith Butler, who is explicitly critical of Foucault along these lines and seeks to compensate for this weakness in his thought. See Judith Butler. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> See Michel Foucault. "What is Enlightenment" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 32–50.

The lurching to evade the most uncomfortable elements of Nietzsche's thought while putting him to radical democratic and egalitarian purposes—even when expressed in language as ugly as “rhizomatic”—has contributed to a frequent misunderstanding of the nature of the political right. The supposition that the political right consists of little more than geriatric millionaires telling kids to clean their room while underpaying their latinx maids may be an attractive one. But it misses how figures like Nietzsche were sickened by the ugliness of the modern world, but broke from the left in feeling the problem didn't lie in a failure to secure more liberty, equality, and solidarity for all. Its ugliness was the inevitable consequence of their being too much liberty, equality, and solidarity for all. More disturbingly still Nietzsche turns the tables on progressives by saying their sexy “radicalism” is in fact nothing more than a dull and unreflective sequel to the Gospel of John; the final chapter (the Freddy vs Jason of politics perhaps?) in a past its prime franchise that peaked 2000 years ago on Golgotha. True radicalism therefore lay not in advancing liberty, equality, and solidarity, but rejecting them for something new. Its to this more authentically Nietzschean project that I now turn.

## Part II: Aristocratic Radicalism

### Theorizing on Nietzsche's Politics

Nietzsche poses special interpretive challenges for readers. This is especially true when it comes to his politics, since any kind of political interpretation inevitably raises the stakes at play considerably. There are considerable questions about the extent to which his work should be periodized; itself unusual since almost all his interesting writings were produced in a period of less than 20 years before the descent into madness silenced Nietzsche forever. From the standpoint of political interpretation Losurdo's break down of Nietzsche's work into three periods with a deep structural affinity is helpful, and is mostly consistent with the position of other readers like Hugo Drochon who also highlight Nietzsche's early interest in nationalist politics before souring on the

matter later in life.<sup>22</sup> Losurdo describes an early Wagnerian and nationalist period between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Untimely Meditations*, a middle quasi-Enlightenment flirtation that spans from *Human all too Human* to *The Gay Science*,<sup>23</sup> and the developed works of Nietzsche's aristocratic maturity starting with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and ending (appropriately) with *Ecce Homo*.<sup>24</sup> In what follows I am largely going to focus on the critique of Christianity and egalitarian politics given during this final period.<sup>25</sup> This is both for reasons of space, and because foregrounding the works of his maturity where these issues were dealt with at the highest level of sophistication will better enable us to appreciate the full and dangerous genius of Nietzsche's political philosophy.

## Democracy, Plato, and the Rise of the Rabble

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche observes that “what is amazing about the religiosity of the ancient Greeks is the enormous abundance of gratitude it exudes: it is a very noble type of man that confronts nature and life in this way. Later, when the rabble gained the upper hand in Greece, fear became rampant in religion too—and the ground was prepared for Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> This short statement covers a lot of ground very quickly, illustrating the complex and mutually determinative relationship between psychology and culture that is at the epicenter of Nietzsche's politics. As far back as *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had already praised the early Dionysian culture of antiquity and expressed

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<sup>22</sup> See Hugo Drochon. *Nietzsche's Great Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Drochon points out that elements of Nietzsche's middle period might even have been useful for democratic purposes, though he stresses this shouldn't come at the expense of “gentling” the broadly critical thrust of his arguments. See Hugo Drochon. *Nietzsche's Great Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 71–75.

<sup>24</sup> Domenico Losurdo. *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Which isn't to say that a more thorough analysis of the development of these ideas isn't of great interest and has been well described elsewhere. See Chapters Three and Four of Robert Wicks. *Nietzsche*. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2002) for an economical description.

<sup>26</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. “Beyond Good and Evil” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 254.

reservations about its transition toward the stolid Apollonian tendency to “congeal the form to Egyptian rigidity and coldness” through the demarcation and sublimation of sacred boundaries.<sup>27</sup>

But now this transition is conceived far more sharply, as a withdrawal from the joyous overflow of gratitude in the face of mass pressures. It was this that gave rise to the “fear in religion” which initially had a certain noble connotation in the philosophy of Plato, for whom the “mob” of the senses knew as little about epistemology and truth as the mob of Athens did about justice. In this respect there was great strength in Plato’s religion, as there is in all genuine creators. But it was also the first step in a gradual withdrawal of thinking from the concreteness of a world defined by suffering and overcoming, and toward a higher point—the “good” and “God” who could make it all worthwhile. In this respect we can already see in Plato the germ form of Christianity, and the paradoxical appeal of seemingly noble and anti-democratic Platonism for the masses. By moving from the grateful Greek religions which embraced the suffering of the world and the heroism required to vindicate it, Plato gave voice to a kind of resentment at the injustice of existence and the sinful pride of men. All of which would require both divine power to redeem it and the continuous effort of the philosopher to bring the world into line with a conception of the just and beautiful she was unwilling to claim as her own, since that would require too much strength on too shaky a foundation. Instead she was recollecting or perceiving the eternal form of justice and truth located in a world more real than this one.

What are the consequences of this politically from an Nietzschean standpoint? He makes it pretty clear in *The Genealogy of Morals* when Plato is castigated as the “greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced. Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the genuine antagonism.”<sup>28</sup> The reference to Homer’s spiritually flat, but still aesthetically grand aesthetics is telling. The quintessential Homeric dyad of Achilles and Odysseus are united in their aristocratic sense of the superior individual who can temporarily master fortune even with the foreknowledge that

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<sup>27</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. “The Birth of Tragedy” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. “The Genealogy of Morals” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 590.

fate is destined to consume him. This is very different from the utopianism of Platonism, whose pessimistic movements rejects this nobility for the prospect of eternal utopian conciliation. This vulgarization can tell us a lot about Platonic politics. While *The Republic* remains a classically elitist text in the sense that only the Philosophers can truly grasp the good and God, it is already becoming vulgar in idealizing a renunciation of the aristocratic heroism and willed for itself and positing a new kind of ideal.<sup>29</sup> One which had a subversively democratic quality to it, in that the philosopher king had a duty to implement an ideal not of her choosing and which required her to coerce, manipulate, or even convince the mass to abide by it.<sup>30</sup> In other words beneath Platonic elitism was already a kind of egalitarian universalism, which required the all to become one and the exceptional to submit themselves before the eternal forms and God on the one hand and to descent to the level of the mass on the other. Only through this dynamic could the fallen world be legitimated through more closely approximating the better and truer world beyond. But while Plato himself was never successful in winning mass converts, in spite of or perhaps because of the undeniable nobility and depth of his writings, Christianity would have no such problems.

## Between Christ and Anti-Christ

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Jesus, *The Gospel of John*

For Nietzsche, Christianity was a startling development in human history. It was first and foremost a slave revolt, driven by resentment, of the weak against the strong. In this revolt Nietzsche makes no bones

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<sup>29</sup> Plato. *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A Grube. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> My reading here owes something to Leo Strauss' lengthy discussion of the ways the philosopher attempts to influence the city. See Leo Strauss. *The City and Man*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).



about being (mostly) on the side of the strong, and his own disdain over Christianity's long and once upon a time seemingly eternal victory flows from this political and aesthetic conviction. And political it is. As Nietzsche points out in *The Anti-Christ*:

A let us not underestimate the fatality that has crept out of Christianity even into politics! No one any longer possesses today the courage to claim special privileges of the right to rule, the courage to feel a sense of reverence towards himself and towards his equals—the courage for a pathos of distance....Our politics is morbid from this lack of courage—The aristocratic outlook has been undermined most deeply by the lie of equality of souls; and if the belief in the 'prerogative of the majority' makes revolutions and will continue to make them—it is Christianity, let there be no doubt about it, Christian value judgement which translates every revolution into mere blood and crime! Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against that which is elevated: the Gospel of the lowly makes low...<sup>31</sup>

This is a remarkably rich passage; all the more impressive since it combines extraordinary depth of insight with a level of venom that is usually a hurdle in the way of such profundities. It is also echoed in the *Genealogy*, where Nietzsche argues again that "political superiority always resolves itself into a concept denoting superiority of soul" while adding the further wrinkle that societies where the ruling case is a priestly caste aren't exceptions to this rule.<sup>32</sup> Here we see the first inkling of Nietzsche's argument that the great egalitarian movements of modernity, motivated as they are by resentment, need not necessarily end in the mediocrity of the last man but instead tyranny and blood.<sup>33</sup> Resentment is defined by saying "no" to the external world and presenting it as fundamentally hostile and different—which is to say—exalted, dangerous, and

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<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1990), pp. 168–169.

<sup>32</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. "The Genealogy of Morals" in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 467.

<sup>33</sup> This point is actually less original than Nietzsche seems to think, having long been argued by reactionaries from Burke through de Maistre. What is distinctive is how Nietzsche reaches this conclusion.

envy inducing—and so initially turning inwards. In this way it transforms morality from an outwardly aesthetic to an ascetic idea by turning the inner life of humankind into an issue for the first time. When it is directed back outward it projects onto the object of hostility all the inversions of exalted qualities it read into its inner life—the noble becomes the proud, the successful becomes the greedy, the strong becomes the wrathful, and so on.

Here we should pause to take note of the way Nietzsche thinks the resentment of the slave morality gives way to the egalitarianism of Christianity. Resentment is sometimes taken to be synonymous with envy, and there is no doubt that even Nietzsche's (usually) careful language in the *Genealogy of Morals* applies an affinity. But envy is closer to wanting what someone else has, and in this sense is not particularly egalitarian even from a Nietzschean standpoint. After all envy of the rich or powerful could be satiated through becoming rich or powerful. What is definitive about Nietzschean resentment emerges when all hope of such satiation becomes impossible. And so envy turns into a desire for revenge; not I want what you have, but I begrudge you having it. This is the truly noxious feature of the egalitarian slave morality from a Nietzschean standpoint; its pathological sense that "if I can't have it, no one should" is at the root of all forms of social leveling and the corrosion of aristocratic excellence.

Nietzsche is of course aware that this seems radically antithetical to the distinctly Christian ethic—far more demanding even than Kantian deontology—that we should not just do our duty before God but to "love one another" as the Gospel of John implored. To get around this he employs one of the most remarkable examples of the hermeneutics of suspicion we've yet seen. This has two components. The first is arguing that the real basis of these surface expressions of love, pity, and care, are in fact really more foundationally predicated on the resentment of the slaves for the masters. Nietzsche's argument to this effect is a lengthy examination of Christian texts, many of which are seething in anticipation of the vengeance God will wrought against the prideful enemies of

his Church.<sup>34</sup> The second stage is to conceal the ugly reality of the origin of Christian morality in these feelings of resentment through the sublimation of slavish characteristics as in fact holy—often through inverting the old aristocratic characteristics and characterizing them as sinful. This process is especially important, as it indicates the surprising creativity and intellectual capacities of Christians. Even more surprising is the fact that they were so successful, the meek in a sense did happen to inherit the earth. The old, beautiful Gods of antiquity gave way to idols dedicated to the ultimate loser of this life: a carpenter's son who had the honor of being the one truly pure Christian who died on the cross at the hands of the very people he wanted so badly to help. Though of course, as the new morality had to instantiate itself, it parasitically absorbed many of the tropes of the old aristocratic morality and even used them to justify its own practices of violence and oppression. Except now in the name of eternal love, rather than eternal pride.

We shouldn't read from this that Nietzsche was exclusively critical of Christian doctrine, even in his most polemical of works. Sometimes he admits being genuinely shocked by it. Despite all surface appearances, the weak were able to transform and overcome their weakness precisely through not overcoming but sublimating it: creatively transforming it into Christian morality and thence metaphysics. But more spectacular than this was the fact that they overcame the strong precisely through neutering the very notion of strength; transforming it through the invention of guilt into pride and wickedness. In so doing Christianity both deepened the soul of mankind through its remarkable interiority and debased it through the permanent dampening of life-affirming values. And in the end its creative cleverness proved to allow it to triumph over the powerful. In the end its sickness proved so powerful that only Christianity was capable of overcoming itself, with a little help from the very dialectical commitment to truth it took over from Plato. As Nietzsche put it in *The Genealogy of Morals*:

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<sup>34</sup> See especially Nietzsche's analysis of Christian accounts of the punishment of sinners in Friedrich Nietzsche. "The Genealogy of Morals" in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), pp. 484–488.

All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming; thus the law of life will have it, the law of the necessity of 'self-overcoming' in the nature of life-the lawgiver himself eventually receives the call....In this way Christianity as a dogma was destroyed by its own morality, in the same way Christianity as morality must now perish to: we stand on the threshold of this event. After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing its most striking inference, its inference against itself; this will happen, however, when it poses the question 'what is the meaning of all will to truth.'<sup>35</sup>

What is of interest here is that much of this passage is a historical description, but it ends with the prophecy that "Christianity as morality must now perish" and indeed that we stand on the "threshold of this event." This is of course not just a speculative position but in keeping with Nietzsche's own muscular conception of the philosopher as a legislator, who has the stomach to will his own values without needing to make them dependent on a transcendent beyond as Plato did. But as we know from other prophecies Nietzsche put forward in less confident moments, he was sometimes less certain that even if this should be the case that it would be the case. Indeed much of Nietzsche's venom would be directed at those ascendant modern doctrines which perpetuated Christian morality by other intellectual and ideological means.

## **Liberalism, Socialism, and Democracy vs Aristocratic Radicalism**

Domenico Losurdo has rightly brought to the fore the novelty of Nietzsche's critique of the left, which is both so distinct and so much more radical than many of its counterparts. Since Edmund Burke and De Maistre, the reactionary tradition has often been seen in Christianity as an antidote to the potentially revolutionary social agitation of modernity which brought about the more socially minded forms of liberalism,

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<sup>35</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. "The Genealogy of Morals" in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 597.

democracy, and socialism. As Hobsbawm observed, even the conservative and moderate liberals of the nineteenth century, so proud of their Enlightenment ancestry, were nevertheless reluctant to “abandon so valuable, perhaps so indispensable, a pillar of stability, morality, and social order” as the Christian religion.<sup>36</sup> To this day plenty of “post-liberals” try to win over moderates by promising the compatibility of an orderly Christian moralism and even intergralism with many of the fundamental features of neoliberal market society.<sup>37</sup> This is of course a comforting ideological fusion—sometimes literally if we think of mid-twentieth fusionism—which assumes an integral or at least elective affinity between possessive individualist liberalism and traditionalist Christianity which would enable it to serve the hegemonic function reactionaries from the nineteenth century have wanted it to. Nietzsche's creativity, indeed his genius, lay precisely in not just rejecting, but mocking the conventional reactionaries timidity before a more horrifying truth. That is, of course, that it is Christianity which is at the root of modern egalitarianism. Demanding infusions of it to counter the left was to mistake the poison for the cure. As Losurdo put it:

Read carefully, Christian discourse was shown to be the preliminary and radical delegitimation of a world against which, later, revolutionary violence was unleashed: was this ot the dialectic that had brought down the ancien regime in France?...The Enlightenment mocked the ancien regime, but even primitive Christianity acted subversively by demonstrating its ‘disbelief in higher people’ and questioning the ‘hierarchy.’<sup>38</sup>

So in Nietzsche's analysis, the problem with conventional reactionaries of the De Maistrean mold is their inability to face up to the Christian and even Platonic origins of what they are confronting, instead insisting

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<sup>36</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm. *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875*. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 274.

<sup>37</sup> See Matthew McManus. *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics*. (Gewerbestrasse, SW: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019) and Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Domenico Losurdo. *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2020), p. 465.

against and again in the face of genealogical evidence that progressivism is a break rather than a continuity with the tradition. This makes a mockery of the claim of conservatives down to Jordan Peterson that the “left”—past and present—is somehow destroying or threatening Western civilization. It is better interpreted as an immanent movement of critique and resistance predicated on its most fundamental principles and tendencies; one of the reasons the left can be very successful is precisely its ability to tap into these deeply historical affects and values.

What is even more sweeping in Nietzsche’s analysis is his insistence that it is not simply one progressive political movement or another, but all of them that embody this genealogical transition. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche claims the modern “democratic movement is the heir of the Christian movement” in its ambition to level aristocratic hierarchies and replace them with the “herd morality.”<sup>39</sup> This point is echoed in the *Genealogy of Morals* where he muses over whether “modern democracy, even more modern anarchism and especially that inclination for “commune,” for the most primitive form of society, which is now shared by all the socialists of Europe, does not signify in the main a tremendous counterattack—and that the conqueror and master race, the Aryan, is not succumbing physiologically, too.”<sup>40</sup> In *The Will to Power* he characterized socialism as the “residue of Christianity and Rousseau” in a de-Christianized world.<sup>41</sup>

So much for democracy and socialism, but what about that other great modernist doctrine: liberalism? During his middle period, as Losurdo also observes, Nietzsche tended to be softer on liberalism than these other doctrines. This is understandable given Nietzsche’s own inclinations toward individualism and his interest in producing a kind of “free-spiritedness.” But even during this period his liberalism was highly elitist, and justified at least in part along lines familiar to someone like

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<sup>39</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. “Beyond Good and Evil” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), pp. 305–306.

<sup>40</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. “The Genealogy of Morals” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 467.

<sup>41</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968) at Sec 1017.

Ludwig von Mises. Which is to say the boon of liberalism from the standpoint of Nietzsche's middle period wasn't so much its emancipation of all, as enabling the more rarefied few to rise and so a more dignified hierarchy to emerge.

This conception of liberalism, as not an egalitarian but effectively a competitive doctrine emulating that stratification of market society is of course the main theme of Losurdo's other major work.<sup>42</sup> While I disagree with his position on liberalism as a whole, there is no space to mince these differences here. Sufficed to say that by the works of Nietzsche's maturity his criticisms had extended to liberalism wholesale as yet another secularized Christian offshoot characteristic of modernity. This is especially true of its more egalitarian forms like utilitarianism. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he launches his now familiar refrain against the "rebellious slave strata who long for dominion, calling it freedom" and castigates their utilitarian and hedonistic proponents for making human beings "smaller."<sup>43</sup> He also rejects the "plebianism" of "mediocre minds" like John Stuart Mill and the influence they are having on the "middle regions of European taste."<sup>44</sup> In *Twilight of the Idols* he becomes even more emphatic, insisting that "liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained; subsequently, there is nothing more harmful to freedom than liberal institutions. One knows, indeed, what they bring about: they undermine the will to power, they are the levelling of mountain and valley exalted to moral principle, they make small, cowardly, and smug—it is the herd animal which triumphs with them every time. Liberalism: in plain words: reduction to the herd animal" and contrasts real freedom to the "well being" demanded by "shopkeepers, Christians, cows, women, Englishmen and other democrats."<sup>45</sup> And in *The Antichrist* he launches the most venomous assault against that paradigmatically liberal achievement—equal rights for all claiming "the poison

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<sup>42</sup> Domenico Losurdo. *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliot. (London, UK: Verso Press, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. "Beyond Good and Evil" in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 343.

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. "Beyond Good and Evil" in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 381.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1990), pp. 103–104.

of the doctrine ‘equal rights for all’-this has been more thoroughly sowed by Christianity than by anything else, from the most secret recesses of base instincts, Christianity has waged a war to the death against every feeling of reverence and distance between man and man, against, that is, the precondition of every elevation, every increase in culture-it has forged out of the resentment of the masses its chief weapon against us....”<sup>46</sup>

## The Great Politics of an Aristocratic Radical

Against these egalitarian doctrines Nietzsche frequently puts forward arguments of a kind of “great politics” which will be far more aesthetically edifying and elevated than what we have seen thus far.<sup>47</sup> Contra some forms of revanchism this wouldn’t necessarily constitute a return to antiquarian or Homeric politics and philosophies, as Heidegger flirts with during his fascist Nietzschean period.<sup>48</sup> Indeed Heidegger’s Greco-philias, and his rather pathetic attempts to see in Nazi Germany a parallel to the ontological glories of ancient Greece, seem quaintly simple and even boring next to the more dialectical sensibility Nietzsche brings to the great politics of aristocratic radicalism. For him the aristocratic radicals of tomorrow will indeed assume the noble and hawk like bearing of Dionysian heroes but retain the internality and depth humanity gained during the Christian era. Except rather than their internality being defined by resentment, it will be defined by the strength to will its own value systems and allow them to exist independent of transcendent sublimation. To depend on the will to power of their maker, in other words. These value systems will be amoral and defined by particularism rather than universalistic forms of individualism. That is to say the aristocratic radical would not demand or even expect that the herd could ever truly desire or even understand what he was trying to accomplish; indeed his elevation and distinctiveness came precisely from the value

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 186.

<sup>47</sup> Hugo Drochon. *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> See Martin Heidegger. *What is Metaphysics?*, trans. Richard Polt. (New Haven, CN: Yale University, 2014).



system he willed into being existing “beyond” the moralistic resentment of the masses.

Iterations of this point are sometimes appealed to as proof that Nietzsche's final position was a kind of existential withdrawal from the modern world and into art. Thus, his philosophy ends with a kind of apolitical bohemianism.<sup>49</sup> And sometimes Nietzsche does indeed write in this way. But this ignores the overwhelming evidence that Nietzsche himself was convinced his work heralded and would precipitate not apoliticism, or even normal politics, but a stupendously and horrifically violent politics such as had never before been seen on the earth. Indeed one of his last sane acts was to cheerfully prophesize just this outcome:

For all that, I am necessarily also the man of calamity. For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has never been dreamed of. The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows great politics.<sup>50</sup>

Lest one retreats into the hermeneutics of innocence to defend against the radical violence of this vision, Nietzsche immediately associates this with the “formula for such a destiny become man.” Namely his “Zarathustra” whose terror will bring about a cleansing of the “decadent” moralities and secularizing Christianity. The aristocratic radicals to bring us great politics will be “terrible” like their philosopher, in that their abandoning the lies of egalitarianism and the creation of new forms of higher elevation shall necessarily have to destroy a great deal. Indeed the very act of destruction might itself be purifying, as a kind of catalyst for self-overcoming and the purging of weakness and cowardice from the earth.

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<sup>49</sup> Walter Kaufmann. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. “Ecce Homo” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 783.

## Conclusion

Nietzsche's philosophy is the greatest critique of the left ever launched. So great in fact that most reactionaries have never been able to stomach it wholesale, since it makes such tremendous demands on them to abandon their own sacred idols. Even more problematically, Nietzsche so links the emergence of Christianity with liberalism, socialism, and democracy that he deeply problematizes the longstanding effort of reactionaries to conceptually and historically parse those egalitarian transitions they're willing to accept from those they are not while suggesting the latter are somehow fundamentally different from the former.

In other words, if Nietzsche is right, there is no taking liberalism with a dash of Christian traditionalism and calling it ordered liberty, without recognizing that the roots of progressive radicalism remain not just uncut but flourishing in their native soil. Consequently a wide swathe of the conservative and reactionary tradition comes to appear not just half-hearted, but self-defeating on its own terms if the objective is indeed to confront the egalitarian movements that sprung to life with the French Revolution and remain the "specter" haunting the world ever since. The political right remains uncreatively limited by the historical horizons which gave birth to progressivism, and consequently is only able to generate derivative or partial critiques of the left which cede so much to the Christian legacy they will never be lastingly effective.

These points should not distract us from the fundamental realization that Nietzsche was very much a man of the right, and that the efforts of post-modern thinkers among others to turn him into a rather conventional French critic of Ancien regime and bourgeois moralism is antithetical to the aristocratic thrust of his work. The flip side to this is that the left has an opportunity on its hands to reconsider its longstanding hostility toward all forms of religiosity and question whether there might indeed be a genealogical affinity between its ambitions and

those of Christianity and other monotheistic faiths.<sup>51</sup> Beyond intellectual, there are good strategic reasons such an interrogation might be valuable.<sup>52</sup> For too long some form of the religious right has monopolized the grammars and rhetorics of religiosity for its own purposes; something progressives by no means need to grant them in what some are calling a post-secular age. Because if Nietzsche is right it turns out it is not the religious right, but the radical left, who are the true heirs of the Christian aspiration for a world of equal brothers and sisters. Even if that is now often and rightly expressed in secularized terms. Pun intended, this would be quite the revelation.

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<sup>51</sup> An attempt at such a conciliation is already underway in some quarters. See Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Another good place to start might be Paul Tillich. *The Socialist Decision*. (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 1977).

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# Nietzsche, Politics, and Truth in an Age of Post-truth

Ronald Beiner

How do we respond, humanly speaking, to a thinker who simply doesn't believe in human dignity or the equal rights of all human beings? Someone who self-consciously denounces the whole moral universe conjured up by the French Revolution and believes that it didn't secure a higher status for humanity but on the contrary incalculably diminished our stature? Who believes that in order to redeem such a thing as human dignity, we need to strive for something *far beyond* our current humanity, and in order to do *that*, need to restore the conceptions of radical hierarchy that were banished by the French Revolution and the whole post-French Revolution moral universe? We would barely know what to make of such a creature—wouldn't really be able to comprehend him even if he was staring us in the face. Stranger still, imagine that such a thinker went on to become one of the most influential thinkers

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of the twentieth century! And was championed to a very large extent by intellectuals of the left.

Bizarre! Yet I am not sketching some hypothetical philosopher on Mars; this is Friedrich Nietzsche, who has influenced and shaped contemporary culture and intellectual life to a staggering degree. What do we make of all this? To be sure, there is a lot going on in the complex and multidimensional texts of Nietzsche, and it is easy to be thoroughly bewildered by the multiplicity of analyses and forms of the rhetoric deployed by Nietzsche, often with the conscious intention of dazzling us and seducing us with his literary virtuosity. We need to stay focused on what is the central core of the fireworks show by which Nietzsche is trying to bewitch us. What is that core? Here's my suggestion: Western civilization, on Nietzsche's view, is going down the toilet because of too much emphasis on truth and rationality and too much emphasis on equal human dignity.

In responding to a radical critique of Nietzsche published by Malcolm Bull in 2011, Keith Ansell-Pearson wrote the following: "I would have liked to have learned more about Bull's motivations in writing [*Anti-Nietzsche*]. Why 'anti-Nietzsche' *now*? What reactionary forces and groupings centred on Nietzsche are at work at present, and, more than this, concertedly working against the progressive forces of the Left? I know of none." The scary Nietzsche who rants about "breeding" and European ruling castes "now looks decidedly dated by his nineteenth-century context."<sup>1</sup> Surely Ansell-Pearson could not have written those sentences today, since it has become all-too-easy to answer the challenge he is posing to Bull. In fact, in my 2018 book, *Dangerous Minds*, I attempt to survey some of the Nietzsche-inspired "reactionary forces and groupings [that] are at work at present."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, "The Future is Subhuman," *Radical Philosophy*, 175, September/October 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

We intellectuals have been too easy on Nietzsche, either ignoring his ultra-reactionary politics or downplaying the relevance of that politics to his real philosophy. Quite possibly, this lenient treatment of Nietzsche is related to the fact that Western liberal societies for about seventy years subsequent to the end of the Second World War enjoyed the luxury (which perhaps we didn't sufficiently appreciate!) of the politics of the far right being utterly discredited. But with the seeming return of fascist or quasi-fascist political possibilities, that happy respite from ultra-right politics may well be over. As I suggest in my book responding to newly resurgent radical-right ideologies, this reappearance of far-right politics requires that we read or re-read Nietzsche with renewed vigilance and gravity. We have to be alive to aspects of his thought that may be a potential resource for the worst kind of politics. Nietzsche's polemics against the Western tradition of Socratic rationalism, with its project to submit the idea of truth to a cynical genealogical unmasking, is one aspect of this. But I would argue that even Nietzsche's complex reflections on truth need to be related back to his broader political project, seen in its full menace.

I'll first address Nietzsche's politics and then turn to the question of truth. In my view, the idea of Nietzsche as an unpolitical or anti-political

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It is fairly effortless to document the Nietzschean inspiration behind many of the leading figures of the contemporary radical-right intelligentsia. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>.

The following item posted by Spencer on the Radix website is highly relevant: <https://radixjournal.com/2018/07/politics-in-the-grand-style/>.

In it, Spencer writes the following: "I had first encountered Nietzsche's writings in the year 2000 in my extracurricular readings while an undergraduate at the University of Virginia. Reading him marked a turning point in my life; indeed, I find it hard to imagine what my approach to thinking about society, politics, and religion would be without Nietzsche as educator." Cf. the following statement by Greg Johnson in a book review of his on the *Counter-Currents* site: "Nietzsche had an immense influence on the entire Conservative Revolutionary movement in Germany, which included Spengler, Jünger, and Schmitt. He also influenced Evola, Benoist, [Guillaume] Faye, Dugin, [Jack] Donovan, Spencer, and me. There simply would not have been a modern radical Right without Nietzsche." Nor should one omit the strong debt to Nietzsche in the writings of Jason Jorjani and Bronze Age Pervert (Costin Alamaru), the latter of whom wrote a doctoral thesis at Yale on Nietzsche and Plato. See also Andrew Marantz, *Antisocial* (New York: Viking, 2019), pp. 137–138; as well as Don Dombowsky, "Nietzsche Viewed from the European New Right," part of an in-progress manuscript entitled *Friedrich Nietzsche and The German Autumn* that Dombowsky has posted on his Academia.edu webpage.



or radically individualistic thinker is so far from being an adequate interpretation that I would be inclined to claim the very opposite: that the *whole* of Nietzsche's philosophy is subordinate to, or in the service of, his politics. That is, core Nietzschean doctrines such as eternal return or the will to power are specifically designed in order to contribute to the realization of his political philosophy—an ultra-reactionary political philosophy aimed at the discrediting of, and eventually the top-to-bottom transformation of (this is after all what “revaluation of values” *means!*), a post-French-Revolution political order where, in Nietzsche's view, equality and social justice are simply euphemisms for European decline. The doctrine of will to power is meant to give metaphysical sanction to those who in Nietzsche's estimation represent strength and self-affirmation. The doctrine of eternal return is meant to debunk and supplant the Christian view that the world is purposive, upheld by a caring providence, and to divide humanity into those who can endure this severe new worldview and those who cannot. As is already implicit in the formulation I have just offered, this doctrine has (i.e., is intended to have) a *eugenic* aspect: Nietzsche in effect suggests that the Untermenschen will find it so terrifying as a philosophy of life that they will start jumping off high buildings.

We need to think hard-headedly and concretely about exactly what Nietzsche may have intended when he spoke, both in *Beyond Good and Evil* (Section 208) and in *Ecce Homo* (“Why I am a Destiny,” Section 1), about the coming age of *große Politik* and about himself as the prophet of *große Politik*. Apart from emphasizing its pan-European character, and its not being limited to petty-nationalistic horizons, Nietzsche never really elaborated what this kind of politics would look like in concrete terms. Clearly, the implication was that it was a kind of imperial political project, gesturing back to glory-oriented empires of the past. In other words, this was a blank check, and a distinctly dangerous one, given the projects of the politics of empire that were (as he predicted) to appear on the scene a few short decades later. When Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” § 39, affirms the need for cultural norms that are “anti-liberal to the point of malice,” he means exactly what he says. When Nietzsche wrote in Section 251 of *Beyond*

*Good and Evil* that what defines the European problem as he understands it (“what is *serious* for me”) is “the breeding of a new caste to rule over Europe,” he really meant “caste” [*Kaste*], he really meant “ruling over Europe” [*über Europa regierenden*], and he really meant “breeding” [*Züchtung*]. These were not metaphors for something “spiritual.” This is politically innocent only on the assumption that Nietzsche would never be read by people who took him at his word. We surely know by now that this assumption is untenable. I would translate *große Politik* as “epic politics”—that is, the politics of declining civilizations (ours!) and rising civilizations (of the future!), as opposed to the boring day-to-day politics of (as Nietzsche sees it) the pedestrian civilization that is currently dominant.

Hans-Georg Gadamer once wrote: “I am in favor of a government and politics that would allow for mutual understanding and the freedom of all.... [This] has been self-evident to any European since the French Revolution, since Hegel and Kant.”<sup>3</sup> This statement is in fact quite false (and Gadamer should have known that it was false). The reality is that there has been in Europe a long succession of radical thinkers who rejected the liberal egalitarianism of the French Revolution root and branch. (Gadamer ought to have known this because his own philosophical mentor was one of these radical thinkers, and also because he lived for twelve horrendous years under a regime that expressed the same ideological rejection.) Almost certainly the most important of these philosophers associated with the tradition of resolute repudiation of liberal modernity in all its moral, political, and cultural dimensions is Friedrich Nietzsche. Generations of readers of Nietzsche have never failed to find ways to “launder” or “sanitize” or at least take the edge off his hatred of freedom and equality as interpreted by modernity. Reading Nietzsche as benign or even as emancipatory would be tolerable if we could be assured that we wouldn’t face a second attempt at putting Nietzschean extremism into practice, with extremely malevolent consequences for the world; but the recent and unexpected rise of the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 264 (“Appendix: A Letter by Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer”).

populist far right tells us, on the contrary, that we must fear and be vigilant about, to quote Conor Cruise O'Brien, "what his messages might effect when they reached minds which were as bold in action as he was bold in thought."<sup>4</sup>

To encapsulate what I take to be central in Nietzsche's cultural criticism, I'll quote two texts—one from early Nietzsche and one from late Nietzsche. The all-important theme of the dissolution of stable anchors of cultural experience receives especially powerful expression in this text from *Schopenhauer as Educator*:

When [the genuine philosopher] thinks of the haste and hurry now universal, of the increasing velocity of life, of the cessation of all contemplativeness and simplicity, he almost thinks that what he is seeing are the symptoms of a total extermination and uprooting of culture. The waters of religion are ebbing away and leaving behind swamps or stagnant pools; the nations are again drawing away from one another in the most hostile fashion and long to tear one another to pieces. The sciences, pursued without any restraint and in a spirit of the blindest *laissez faire*, are shattering and dissolving all firmly held belief; the educated classes and states are being swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy. The world has never been more worldly, never poorer in love and goodness. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or refuges in the midst of this turmoil of secularization; they themselves grow daily more restless, thoughtless, and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism.<sup>5</sup>

Lukács quotes a passage from early Nietzsche that provides crucial elucidation of what Nietzsche had in mind in criticizing "secularization" in this *Schopenhauer as Educator* text: "The drive ... to disseminate culture as widely as possible has its origins in a total secularization, by which culture is reduced to a means of gain and of earthly happiness in the vulgar sense."<sup>6</sup> It wouldn't be far wide of the mark to say that Nietzsche's later idea of "the last man" was another way of articulating

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<sup>4</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980), p. 326.

what he meant by “secularization” in these early texts. As Lukács highlights quite well, it basically means that the universalization of culture as conceived by liberal modernity entails the reduction of culture in its sacredness or holiness to what is utterly profane. For late Nietzsche as for early Nietzsche, there is no worse disaster for humanity.

My second privileged text is *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 188:

What is essential “in heaven and on earth” seems to be, to say it once more, that there should be *obedience* over a long period of time and in a *single* direction: given that, something always develops, and has developed, for whose sake it is worthwhile to live on earth; for example, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality—something transfiguring, subtle, mad, and divine. The long unfreedom of the spirit, the mistrustful constraint in the communicability of thoughts, the discipline thinkers imposed on themselves to think within the directions laid down by a church or court—all this, however forced, capricious, hard, gruesome, and anti-rational, has shown itself to be the means through which the European spirit has been trained to strength, ruthless curiosity, and subtle mobility, though admittedly in the process an irreplaceable amount of strength and spirit had to be crushed, stifled, and ruined.<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche’s cardinal idea here is encapsulated best in *The Will to Power*, § 961, where he celebrates “protracted *despotic moralities*” because “they tense the bow”<sup>8</sup> (a persistent and defining metaphor for Nietzsche, also to be found in *Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, § 12, and the Preface as well as §§ 206 and 262 of *Beyond Good and Evil*). The idea is for human cultures to shoot consummately high, and indulgent modernity, with its flabby liberal norms, doesn’t stretch the bow with nearly enough tension to be able to do that; hence its decisive inferiority to pre-modern “despotic moralities.” One could say that the intended purpose of the Enlightenment and of modern liberalism was to undo the “crushing, stifling, and ruining” of the human mind and spirit that Nietzsche refers

<sup>7</sup> *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 291.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 504; my italics.

to in the text we have quoted from *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 188, but at a price that Nietzsche regards as absolutely unacceptable.

Nietzsche was interested in how, for a very few rare individuals, the debunking of morality and universal reason could liberate them to refashion their selves with much greater freedom and creativity. But Nietzsche also believed that the vast majority of the inhabitants of modernity were sunken far too deeply in mediocrity for this project of self-creation to be of any relevance to them. Contrary to what is suggested by countless left-Nietzscheans, Nietzsche, of course, *wasn't* interested in promoting greater openness, tolerance, or inclusion for the marginalized. On the contrary, his beef against modern post-Christian civilization was not that it was illiberal and insufficiently inclusive but rather that it was too egalitarian and too weak in legislating definite horizons within which the mediocre majority could find a clear purpose in life. That's why Nietzsche wanted to encourage greater strength and robustness of will for the few capable of re-fashioning themselves: having exercised the will necessary to recreate their own selves, they could also legislate new norms that would put an end to the weak and irresolute cultural vacuum into which a post-Christian egalitarian culture had collapsed. In Nietzsche's view, the "spiritlessness"<sup>9</sup> of modernity flows from modernity's excess of knowledge, or excess of preoccupation with truth.

Nietzsche's core concerns are expressed with unsurpassable power in the famous "parable of the madman" in *Gay Science* (§ 125). After the madman informs his listeners in the marketplace that he and they are the murderers of God, he asks the following questions:

How could we drink up the sea? *Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?* 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? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is R.J. Hollingdale's translation for *Mattherzigkeit* in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Breazeale, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 181; my italics.

The idea of “horizonlessness” is the central and decisive one. The entire horizon has been wiped away. And with no horizon, we have no means of orientation—no up or down, no left or right. All we have is empty space, through which we float without any sense of what direction might be the right one. All authoritative norms have been effaced, and by our own perverse agency: self-inflicted nihilism. All that is left to us, culturally speaking, is to drift aimlessly through the void. The force of this text is not to make an argument about whether God exists or doesn’t exist. It’s a work of *cultural commentary*, describing a form of social life where *privileged horizons*, horizons that sustain a definite understanding of the point of human existence, have ceased to exist. Nietzsche the heroic atheist writes as if he is *nostalgic* about an era of committed pious belief precisely because a world where the idea of God has inconspicuously slipped away, virtually without anyone noticing or caring very much, betokens a world where robust horizons of life are too open-ended to be real horizons. And without real horizons of commitment and devotion, life is doomed to be incapable of being life-affirming. “Nostalgia” for some earlier cultural epoch of firm belief isn’t the right way to put it. But the point is: he clearly experiences *dread* at what he sees as a present defined by horizonlessness and the loss of all definite anchors.

This theme is spelled out even more directly in the section immediately preceding the “madman” aphorism, namely *Gay Science* § 124: “*In the horizon of the infinite*. – We have left land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us.... There is nothing more terrifying than infinity.”<sup>11</sup> These are simply alternative images in order to convey the same teaching as that in § 125: the inevitable effect of modernity’s banishing of all meaningful horizons is vertigo, anguish, and “homesickness” for the *terra firma* that has been foolishly conjured away. The obvious meaning of the aphorism’s title is that a “horizon of the infinite” is precisely *not* a horizon.

The message from these texts is clear: Nietzsche wanted creativity and open horizons for the heroic philosopher, and wanted brutally closed

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

and confined horizons for everyone else. His rhetoric often suggests that he wants openness and free-spiritedness for everyone. But in truth his view is that self-creation and unbounded horizons for everyone generate cultural catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. The democratic, bourgeois, post-Enlightenment world that he hated had, he thought, brought about precisely this epic cultural catastrophe. Nietzsche certainly anticipated that he would have a substantial following in the twentieth century. That he expected that this following would encompass a *mass readership* seems much more unlikely. People generally need to believe that the horizons defining their particular view of life are *true*. Therefore, communicating not just to spiritual elites but to the demos at large that these horizons are *willed fabrications* seems counter-productive, to put it mildly. (In that sense, Nietzsche *really is*, despite his own intentions, contributing to the further radicalizing of open-horizoned cultural liberalization that he despised and warned against.)

It is indeed true that there's a lot of pro-individualistic rhetoric deployed by Nietzsche. This rhetoric has always attracted young existentialist readers. But there's an equal abundance of Nietzschean rhetoric appealing to hierarchy, elites, and top-down legislation of values oriented to aristocratic normative horizons. There's an obvious contradiction between these two rhetorics, so one needs a deeper interpretation giving an account of how the two opposing rhetorics relate to each other. There are basically three alternatives: (1) Nietzsche was somehow unaware of this contradiction, didn't notice that they point in opposing directions, and hence didn't really know where he stood normatively. (2) He wasn't really serious about the second rhetoric: it was a lot of huffing and puffing, without implying any serious philosophical commitment. Or, much more plausibly, (3) The rhetoric of free, creative value-legislation and individuals being liberated from universal moral norms is not intended for the demos, the Untermenschen whose lives count for little. Instead, it is intended for the Nietzschean elite, the Übermenschen who will form the new ruling class that will dominate Europe and eventually dominate the world. The latter will indeed dictate to the former binding cultural norms that will be a source of existential meaning that a democratic culture is incapable of supplying. The third interpretation makes sense of how the two rhetorics stand in relation to each other, which is

why it's much more plausible than the naïve existentialist interpretation. This, more than anything, is the foundation of Nietzsche's significance for the contemporary far right. His anti-nationalism, for instance, is in that sense a relatively trivial side-issue.

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Since the Enlightenment, there has been a line of important thinkers for whom life in liberal modernity is felt to be profoundly dehumanizing. Thinkers in this category include, but are not limited to, Maistre, Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, and Heidegger. For such thinkers, liberal modernity is *so* humanly degrading that one ought to (if one could) undo the French Revolution and its egalitarianism, and perhaps cancel out the whole moral legacy of Christianity. For all of them, hierarchy and rootedness are more morally compelling than equality and individual liberty; democracy is seen as diminishing our humanity rather than elevating it. We are unlikely to understand why fascism is still kicking around in the twenty-first century unless we are able to grasp why certain intellectuals of the early twentieth century gravitated toward fascism, namely, on account of a grim preoccupation with the perceived soullessness of modernity, and a resolve to embrace *any* politics, however extreme, that seemed to them to promise “spiritual renewal,” to quote Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> For these thinkers (and their contemporary adherents), liberalism, egalitarianism, and democracy are a recipe for absolute deracination, and hence for a profound contraction of the human spirit, which presumably is what Heidegger had in mind when he spoke of spiritual renewal. For the political-philosophical tradition within which Nietzsche and Heidegger stand, the French Revolution inaugurates a moral universe where authority resides with the herd, not with the shepherd, with the mass (the “They”), not with the elite, and as a consequence, ultimately the whole experience of life spirals down into unbearable shallowness and meaninglessness. Ferdinand Mount, in a review essay on Goethe, rightly suggests that Nietzsche viewed Goethe as an anticipation of the culture of the *Übermensch* for which Nietzsche yearned because “only Goethe

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<sup>12</sup> *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 162.



had treated the French Revolution and the doctrine of equality with the disgust they deserved.”<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the central thought animating Nietzsche is that all societies are ultimately judged by the greatness or feebleness of their cultural achievements. Consider what is required to produce something like the pyramids of ancient Egypt. A way of life lived within liberal or democratic or egalitarian horizons could never produce a culture of this scale of grandeur or enduringness; in fact, the Nietzschean view would be that modern “horizons” aren’t binding or enduring enough even to merit the name “horizon.” What the Egyptians produced is capable of being beheld in awe for millennia. What we produce will be forgotten almost immediately. That’s the standard. They ascended to a genuinely *civilizational* culture, whereas we are, to borrow Heidegger’s phrase from the Rectoral Address, a “moribund pseudo-civilization.”<sup>14</sup> But it took a slave economy ruled by the most rigid hierarchy imaginable in order to produce what the Egyptians produced. Nietzsche would say: so be it. Willing the end entails willing the means. Indeed, he would go further: the fact that modernity is incapable of willing the means required for the attainment of the uniquely humanly-defining end (a civilizational culture) is in itself a definitive condemnation of modernity. So: If one wants to have pyramids that will be marveled at for millennia, one needs slaves to build these pyramids. You can choose to live in a society that doesn’t aspire to build the kind of thing that will be marveled at for millennia, but then one will have chosen to live in a society ruled by those who should be in the slave class. That’s a mistaken choice, he thinks, and modern societies that have opted to go that route will bore themselves to death and eventually collapse in on themselves. This is, at its core, the meaning of the doctrine of the last man; it was later re-stated quite explicitly in exactly these terms by the arch-fascist, Julius Evola.

The great test of whether one can be genuinely honest about the character of Nietzsche’s politics, *and the vision of life that animates those politics*, is whether one can read §§ 37–39 of “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” in *Twilight of the Idols* without flinching (or without trying to

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<sup>13</sup> Ferdinand Mount, “Super Goethe,” *New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Wolin, p. 38.

pretend that he isn't writing what he is writing). Let me present a few juicy selections, though it's important to read the three sections in their entirety. Nietzsche begins by mocking a journal editor who is dumbfounded by Nietzsche's elevation of Cesare Borgia to the status of an *Übermensch*. "We should be under no illusion that Cesare Borgia's contemporaries would not laugh themselves to death at the comic spectacle of us moderns, with our thickly padded humanity, going to any length to avoid bumping into a pebble."<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche thinks that it is a mistake to believe that one can have the transcendently superior culture of the Renaissance without the imperviousness to moral scruples of the Renaissance, and modernity is inherently incapable of the former because it is inherently incapable of appreciating how culture and immorality are an inseparable package. What modernity offers is a hyper-moralized environment where "everyone is sick" and "everyone is a nurse": an "old lady morality" where the imperative to be kind and sensitive ruins anything that might make life worth living. "What used to be the spice of life would be *poison* for us."<sup>16</sup> The liberal appeal to enhanced freedom is for Nietzsche based on a false conception of freedom: "nothing damages freedom more terribly or more thoroughly than liberal institutions."<sup>17</sup> If liberalism offers a false understanding of freedom, where do we look for a correct understanding of it? Nietzsche tells us very clearly. "War is what teaches people to be free.... Becoming indifferent to hardship, cruelty, deprivation, even to life. Being ready to sacrifice people for your cause, yourself included. Freedom means that the manly instincts which take pleasure in war and victory have gained control over the other instincts, over the instinct of 'happiness,' for instance."<sup>18</sup> The appropriate test is met by warriors who "wipe their shoes on the miserable type of well-being that grocers, Christians, cows, females, Englishmen, and other democrats dream about."<sup>19</sup> By what standard do we ultimately judge the pitiful horizons of life presupposed by modernity? Nietzsche again spells

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<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

this out very clearly: *Julius Caesar* (“the most magnificent type”)! We moderns need to be schooled by Nietzsche such that we become capable of measuring our own feebleness by seeing ourselves in the mirror of “those great hothouses for the strong, for the strongest type of people ever to exist, aristocratic communities in the style of Rome and Venice.”<sup>20</sup> All of this is nicely encapsulated in a text in *The Will to Power*, § 864: “The honorable term for *mediocre* is, of course, the word ‘*liberal*.’”

If Heidegger is right that Nietzsche’s central teaching is that democracy = nihilism,<sup>21</sup> on what basis does Nietzsche believe that to be a valid conclusion? *Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, Section 12 offers a very clear answer to that question. “We suspect that things will just continue to decline, getting thinner, better-natured, cleverer, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian... In losing our fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our respect for him, our hope in him and even our will to be man.... What is nihilism today if it is not *that*?”<sup>22</sup> Roger Cohen, in a 2018 op-ed on the rise of quasi-authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland, quotes a former Polish Foreign Minister’s expression of disdain toward “those who believe history is headed inevitably toward ‘a new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy.’”<sup>23</sup> The project of populist nationalists in Poland and Hungary is to defend what they take to be European Christian civilization from such pathetic wimps. This, one should not fail to recognize, is a twenty-first-century version of Nietzsche’s story about the last men. If we simply ask

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: der Wille zur Macht*, ed. Bernd Heimbüchel (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), p. 193. I have cited this from the 1985 German edition because it was expunged from the 1961 edition on which David Farrell Krell’s English translation was based. For discussion, see Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, pp. 105–108. In this previously suppressed text, Heidegger calls democracy “*eine Abart*” (that is, a mutation or degenerate form) of nihilism. Sidonie Kellerer, in “Rewording the Past: The Postwar Publication of a 1938 Lecture by Martin Heidegger,” *Modern Intellectual History*, 11: 3 (November 2014), p. 585, helpfully informs us about *Abart* that “in the Nazi period this biologicistic term had profoundly racist connotations.”

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Cohen, “How Democracy Became the Enemy,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2018.

who would be Nietzsche's preferred political leader in the contemporary world, my suggestion is that it would almost certainly be Putin.

It gets worse. Look at *Twilight of the Idols*, "Improving' Humanity," § 4. Nietzsche celebrates the caste morality of ancient India because it—rightly—aims at a morality of breeding; modernity, under the malign influence of Christian moral universalism, is condemned by its being "a counter-movement to every morality of breeding, race, or privilege."<sup>24</sup> The Law of Manu offers "the most magnificent example" of a morality geared to "a breeding scheme" intended for something other than "taming" those so bred. It exemplifies "Aryan humanity for once, in its pure and primordial form." Christianity, by contrast, ("the *anti-Aryan* religion *par excellence*") represents "the revaluation of all Aryan values, the victory of Chandala values, the gospel preached to the poor and the base, the general revolt of the downtrodden, the miserable, the malformed, the failures, against anyone with 'breeding.'"<sup>25</sup> What Nietzsche intends with his revaluation of values, clearly, is *to reverse the revaluation previously enacted by Christian morality*, that is, to return from what he sees as counter-nature to what he sees as nature. When Nietzsche, in *The Antichrist*, § 57, refers to the order of castes as "a *natural order*, natural lawfulness *par excellence*,"<sup>26</sup> he's suggesting that a social order where the masters ruthlessly dominate the slaves is the default position of humankind, and even if we softheaded moderns have duped ourselves into believing that we have tossed that "natural order" into the rubbish bin of history, sooner or later we will be forced to acknowledge that nature will reassert itself against our foolish modern delusions. Anyone who thinks that Nietzsche does not actually believe what he is saying in such texts needs a stern wake-up call, which is what I'm trying to offer. The left-Nietzschean strategy has been to pretend that such texts don't exist, or if they do exist, to assume that they aren't relevant to his real philosophy. That conceit was perhaps tolerable on the assumption that right-Nietzscheanism is not an imaginable possibility. I'm here to report that that happy luxury of the seventy years from 1945 to 2015

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<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

no longer obtains. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in a powerful challenge to Nietzsche apologists penned in the late 1960s, rightly pointed out that when we confront Nietzsche's scariest texts, it is not "consoling to think of what some future readers of this master may have in store for us."<sup>27</sup> It's as if he were predicting today's Alt-right.

Nietzscheans in the contemporary academy are convinced that the great truth that Nietzsche's philosophy teaches us is that of hyperpluralism. Metaphysics seeks for foundations and Nietzsche is anti-metaphysical insofar as he deconstructs all such foundations. Philosophical truth is singular whereas Nietzsche's "truths" are radically plural. By way of challenging this dominant view, in my book I align myself with a mid-twentieth-century lecture on Nietzsche given by Thomas Mann and a 1996 book published by the Cornell German studies scholar, Geoff Waite, in claiming that there is indeed a hard center to Nietzsche's thought; with respect to his political philosophy, there is a *central project*.<sup>28</sup> And contrary to what some claim, he definitely does have a political philosophy!<sup>29</sup> What is this center? What is his project? To formulate it a little more directly and explicitly than I do in the book, I would articulate it as follows: Nietzsche looks at the culture of nineteenth-century Europe and sees it as shabby, vulgar, and spiritually hollow. (And if that is how Nietzsche sees *nineteenth-century* European culture, how on earth would he respond to the endless banalities of current-day television and the internet!) He wants to trace the problem to its origins. According to his analysis, the problem starts with the egalitarianism of Christianity (all individuals, as children of God, are of equal

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<sup>27</sup> Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance*, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> See in particular the January 3, 1888 letter from Nietzsche to Paul Deussen quoted by Waite in which Nietzsche says that critics are hardly equipped to judge what might be "eccentric" in his work since "these gentlemen ... have no clue as to my center [centrum], as to the great passion in the service of which I live"; Geoff Waite, *Nietzsche's Corps/e* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 212. There is a virtually identical line in another letter written a couple of weeks earlier, namely his December 14, 1887 letter to Carl Fuchs: it makes no sense to complain about his eccentricities "since people do not know where my center is"; *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Christopher Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 280.

<sup>29</sup> For a response to those who claim that Nietzsche offers no political philosophy, see my essay, "Transversal Racialisation: Losurdo's Account of What Is and Isn't Proto-Fascist in Nietzsche," forthcoming in *Historical Materialism*.

worth). More specifically, the rot sets in with the Protestant Reformation (the judgments of the common man are of a worth and dignity equal to that of putative elites; no one should defer to the supposedly higher judgment and taste of cultural elites). So: one has to destroy Christianity as well as the democratic culture that it spawned. One has to use all possible intellectual weapons for that purpose, including the rhetoric of deconstructing or “genealogizing” authoritative truths (though Nietzsche himself is not lacking for authoritative truths of his own). One can then reinstate pre-French-Revolution hierarchy, iron discipline, and top-down legislation, by superior individuals, of authoritative cultural norms. One will once again be able to restore real cultures that people can live by and that provide a commanding sense of meaning and purpose, relative to which the culture of liberalism and liberal freedom presents itself as mere void and ennui. Once one sees Nietzsche in that light, the picture of him as a hyper-pluralist starts to melt away. Not only that but one quickly comes to understand the source of Nietzsche’s appeal to far-right intellectuals of the present.

One of the many things that Georg Lukács gets right about Nietzsche is the “Jekyll-and-Hyde character” of Nietzsche’s literary output: what one gets in Nietzsche, according to Lukács, is an “oscillation between the most acute feeling for nuance, the keenest oversensitivity, and a suddenly erupting, often hysterical brutality.”<sup>30</sup> This helps a lot to explain how people get seduced or duped by Nietzsche. They get attracted to the former side of Nietzsche’s intellectual personality, and skirt around or edit out the latter side. Coming to a clearer understanding of how Nietzsche is capable of providing intellectual resources for the contemporary radical right will require putting this right.

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Let’s turn now to truth. It seems unlikely that anyone can craft a fully consistent account of Nietzsche on truth (though no doubt many have tried). Half the time he appeals to truth as an uncompromising aspiration for (especially) philosophers, and half the time he seems to be doing his utmost to demolish the credibility of truth-seeking as such, even as a

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<sup>30</sup> Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, p. 315.

noble aspiration. A few relevant texts will be familiar to anyone reasonably well-versed in Nietzsche's work. In the early text "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," he famously writes that truth consists in our having forgotten that "society, in order to exist, imposes [an obligation] to use the customary metaphors, or in moral terms, the obligation to lie according to an established convention, to lie collectively in a style that is mandatory for everyone."<sup>31</sup> "Only by forgetting that primitive metaphor-world, only by the hardening and rigidification of the mass of images that originally gushed forth as hot magma out of the primeval faculty of human fantasy ... in short, only insofar as man forgets himself as a subject, indeed as an *artistically creative* subject, does he live with some calm, security and consistency."<sup>32</sup> That is: truth is basically illusory, because it arises out of a process whereby we repress the memory that whatever we think attaches to the world as object was in fact *put there* by our own world-creating subjectivity. "If someone hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable; but that is the way it is with the seeking and finding of 'truth' within the rational sphere."<sup>33</sup>

It would be effortless to find in late Nietzsche texts that express the same privileging of willful and assertive creativity over rational apprehension of a world not fashioned by ourselves. Consider *The Will to Power*, § 495: "The joy in shaping and reshaping – a primeval joy! We

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<sup>31</sup> *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair and David J. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252. In a tweet posted on July 25th, 2021, Richard W. Painter quoted Nietzsche from the same text—"What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed"—and then commented: "We know exactly what happened when after 1933 much of an entire country believed this about truth." Harrison Fluss has reminded me of Geoff Waite's quotation of a Philip K. Dick notebook entry that is relevant. In the midst of affirming a commitment to fascist ideology, Dick writes: "My fascistic premise is: 'There is not truth. We *make* truth; what we (first) believe *becomes* objectively true. Objective truth depends on what we believe, not the other way around.' This is the essence of the Fascist epistemology, the perception of truth as ideology imposed on reality – mind over matter"; for the full quotation, see Waite, *Nietzsche's Corpses*, pp. 388–389. One could not hope for a clearer or more direct statement of how a Nietzschean conception of truth feeds into fascism.

<sup>33</sup> *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, p. 251.

can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made.”<sup>34</sup> Or § 605, where Nietzsche identifies as “the essence of philosophy” not “the ascertaining of ‘truth’ and ‘untruth,’ the ascertaining of facts in general” but rather “creative positing... forming, shaping, overcoming, willing”—the supreme task whereby we “*posit a goal* and mold facts according to it.”<sup>35</sup> It would be difficult not to notice the clear parallel in such texts between the business of philosophy as Nietzsche conceives it and the business of politics as he likewise conceives it. *Both* revolve around will, creativity, value-legislation, and the steel-tempered imposition of norms that have a foundation in nothing beyond their own intransigent assertion. Or consider his assertion in *Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, § 24, that one must perform an unmasking genealogy on the piety and asceticism of the faith in truth that runs throughout the Western philosophical tradition. As is well-known, the whole philosophy of Foucault (namely, his attempt to see truth as a normative aspiration exposed as a mask for what are in reality cynical “regimes of truth”) is merely the radicalization of Nietzsche’s project to stop worshiping at the altar of truth and instead unmask it as an idol. Or consider Nietzsche’s weird (and somewhat ludicrous) references, both in *Genealogy* III.24 and in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, to the feminine character of truth, conjuring up (we can speculate) tacit images of seduction by masculine dominance. (Is it *truth* that gets seduced or merely the impressionable readers of these beguiling texts?) Or consider Nietzsche’s teaching in § 56 of *The Antichrist* that while one can certainly object to the priestly lies emanating from a religion of benevolence and compassion like Christianity, no such objections apply to the lies that are required to establish a sufficiently illiberal and hierarchical culture such as the one he praises in this context (ancient Hinduism). “Ultimately, it is a matter of the end to which one lies.”

In Nietzsche’s view, people, to live life-affirming lives, need to live within very strict understandings of the purpose of life, and the more rigidly and authoritatively these horizons of existence get legislated, the better the prospects for a culture of self-affirmation and grandeur. Hence Nietzsche’s emphatic theme of the connection between philosophers as

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<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 272.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.



the true elite and the imperative of ruling. “*Genuine philosophers*,” he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 211, “*are commanders and legislators: they say, ‘thus it shall be!’*” They first determine the Whither and For What of man, and in so doing have at their disposal the preliminary labor of all philosophical laborers, all who have overcome the past. With a creative hand they reach for the future, and all that is and has been becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer. Their ‘knowing’ is *creating*, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is – *will to power*.<sup>36</sup> Or as he expresses the same point in *The Will to Power*, § 144: “Moralities and religions are the principal means by which one can make whatever one wishes out of man, provided one possesses a superfluity of creative forces and can assert one’s will over long periods of time.”<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche wants to exalt philosophers to the highest rank of human beings, but at the same time he is determined to repudiate any ideal of philosophy as *contemplative*; philosophy, on the contrary, is presented as entirely oriented to *action*, to the re-shaping of the world according to its superior insight, superior vitality, and superior will. The same conception can be traced all the way back to *Schopenhauer as Educator*: “Let us think of the philosopher’s eye resting upon existence: he wants to determine its value anew. For it has been *the proper task of all great thinkers to be lawgivers* as to the measure, stamp and weight of things.”<sup>38</sup> As he puts it near the end of that text, philosophers constitute the ultimate “tribunal.”<sup>39</sup> A paltry, humanly unimpressive, and complacent culture—as all modern cultures are, in Nietzsche’s view—would readily flatter itself that it is humanly adequate if genuine philosophers, with their ferocious will to truth cum

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<sup>36</sup> *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, p. 326. The last phrase in this important quotation is worth careful attention. It informs us that in the case of genuine philosophers (presumably including Nietzsche himself), the will to truth is not really a will to truth at all but a will to something else. That in turn suggests that the *essence* of philosophy as the high or highest human possibility that Nietzsche takes it to be, its decisive human import, consists not in something contemplative but in something practical: a reshaping of human destiny. It suggests that the yearning for truth is *subordinate* in the broader scales of Nietzsche’s judgment to something other than yearning for truth. Legislating a new moral and political dispensation takes precedence. Hence my claim about the primacy of Nietzsche’s *political* philosophy in relation to the rest of his philosophy.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Breazeale, p. 144; my italics.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

will to power, didn't rise up to reassert higher standards of what it is to be human.

So: Is it the case that Nietzsche doesn't deploy truth claims? No philosophy, not even Nietzsche's, can afford to be indifferent to its truth! Nietzsche seems to care about whether his doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is true, even though propagating it as a kind of myth or new religious dogma might have existential and political effects the same as or similar to those that they would have if he could establish the doctrine's truth. (Lou Andreas-Salomé, to whom Nietzsche privately confided his idea, reports that Nietzsche even contemplated investing years in bolstering his knowledge of science in the hope and expectation that it would yield scientific proof of the doctrine!<sup>40</sup>) It's the same with his doctrine of will to power. And it's certainly the same with his "genealogical" (= unmasking) analysis of morality and Christian morality in particular. Notwithstanding his assertion in *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 211, that the will to truth of philosophers is reducible to their will to power, those doctrines are not asserted as useful fictions; they are asserted as truer and more honest than the alternative doctrines held by everyone (whether philosophers or non-philosophers) who are innocent of Nietzschean insights regarding the binding "natural order," as Nietzsche chillingly calls it in *The Antichrist*, § 57—insights that he believes himself to grasp with greater lucidity and assurance than any other modern.

The key principle has been stated by Timothy Snyder: "Post-truth is pre-fascism."<sup>41</sup> What we have seen in this era of post-truth is the emergence of harsh new ideologies ("Bannonism" is one salient example) that appear to regard respect for truth as a snare for the strong set by the weak, as Nietzsche largely presents it. Exactly how much blame does Nietzsche bear for encouraging us in the direction of our current age of

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<sup>40</sup> Lou Salomé, *Nietzsche*, ed. Siegfried Mandel (Redding Ridge, CT: Black Swan Books, 1988), pp. 130–131.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017), p. 71.

post-truth? First of all, it's difficult to see how he could fail to encourage us in that direction, given all his polemicizing against and efforts to delegitimize the tradition of Western rationalism. In impugning Socrates as the founder of dialectics (i.e., reason-based argument as the heart of philosophy) as an anti-tragic, anti-noble "plebeian art," as Nietzsche does from *The Birth of Tragedy* right through to the *Twilight of the Idols*, he surely means to impugn the tradition of Socratic rationalism that runs through the whole philosophical tradition from Plato onward. Secondly, if Snyder is right that post-truth is a prelude to fascism, and if it's the case that Nietzsche intended to inaugurate some manner of post-truth culture (namely, a culture that prizes myth and enchantment over reason and disenchantment), then presumably Nietzsche does help cultivate in some sense the pre-fascist environment we're currently seeing in Russia, in many European societies, and even in the United States during the Trump years (which might well come to experience a Trump sequel!). We can't blame all this on Nietzsche, naturally, any more than we can put the sole blame on him for Mussolini and Hitler. But if we're determined to steer the politics of the twenty-first century away from the shoals crashed into by the politics of the twentieth century, we'd better look for other philosophers from whom to draw spiritual and intellectual guidance than Nietzsche.

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# Nietzsche as Muse to the Extreme Right

Stephen L. Newman

Brian Leiter argues, compellingly in my view, that Nietzsche doesn't have a political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> After all, Nietzsche is not concerned with the state or justice or any of the things that typically occupy the minds of political philosophers. He offers no political prescriptions. But that does not mean his writings have no implications for politics. Nietzsche is

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (First published Thu Aug 26, 2004; substantive revision Thu Feb 27, 2020). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/>. The most influential proponent of an apolitical reading of Nietzsche's works is, of course, Walter Kaufman. See in particular his *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

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commonly acknowledged, even by those who admire him as a thinker of the first rank, to be anti-liberal and anti-democratic. Although a champion of a sort of individuality—that associated with the artistic genius of “higher men”—he spares no concern for the dignity of the average person. And he is contemptuous of the demos, the mass of ordinary persons who constitute the civic body, which he refers to dismissively as “the herd.” According to Nietzsche, the herd mentality fosters a culture of mediocrity inimical to genius. Persons of a higher sort must transcend the values of the herd, defying all that the herd calls good and right and just in order to live according to their (superior) nature. But because, per Leiter, the only goal is the liberation of these “higher men,” nothing *necessarily* follows from this for politics. Nietzsche’s works feature no scheme for the renovation of the social and political order, no call for revolution, and no prospect of utopia. Nietzsche appeals to men like himself (or as he imagined himself to be), superior persons, persons of artistic genius, whose lives can be a work of art performed for their own satisfaction. What political influence his works have had, then, owes to his impact as a critic of the public culture that arises with—and sustains—modern liberal democracy.

This chapter charts, in a somewhat rough and ready fashion, the course of Nietzsche’s influence as muse to the far right. I begin with a consideration of Nietzsche’s concern for the fate of genius in the democratic age, a concern he shared in common with liberal thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and J.S. Mill. I go on to distinguish his disdain for democratic egalitarianism from their more positive attitudes toward democracy and discuss how his contempt for the masses, aristocratic leanings, and frequently brutal imagery make him attractive to twentieth-century fascists and their ideological descendants. I explore the way in which Nietzschean themes are appropriated by and serve to weave together two seemingly disparate elements of today’s extreme right, the market-oriented libertarian movement and the neo-fascist alt-right. Finally, I situate Nietzsche’s influence on the far right in the context of the present crisis of democracy, as manifest in the rise of illiberal democracy in the United States and Europe.

## Democracy's Rise and the Fate of Genius

The demos—Nietzsche's "herd"—was socially and politically ascendent in the nineteenth century, and Nietzsche was hardly the first to express anxiety over the fate of genius in an era of democratic revolutions. The emergence of an egalitarian society in the United States caused Alex de Tocqueville, the first great chronicler of the dawning democratic age, to express concern over the conformist tendencies of the demos. In democracies, Tocqueville wrote, public opinion "uses no persuasion to forward its beliefs, but by some mighty pressure of the mind of all upon the intelligence of each it imposes its ideas and makes them penetrate men's very souls."<sup>2</sup> American novelist James Fenimore Cooper agreed, marveling at the power of "they say"—the power of public opinion—to intimidate just about everyone.<sup>3</sup> Essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in a similar vein at roughly the same time, complained that everywhere society is "in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," and instructed his readers that "whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." Seemingly in anticipation of Nietzsche's defiance of conventional morals, Emerson asserted that "[n]o law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names readily transferable to this or that; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it."<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, Tocqueville, Cooper, and Emerson were friendly critics of democracy. They sought to elevate the demos by fostering what George

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<sup>2</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Trans. George Lawrence, Ed. J.P. Mayer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 435.

<sup>3</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Classics, 1981; reprint of the 1931 edition published by Alfred A. Knopf), pp. 197–205.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage Books/Library of America edition, 1990), pp. 31; 32. Interestingly, Nietzsche thought highly of Emerson. Writing in 1884, he described Emerson as, "a glorious, great nature, rich in soul and spirit" and pronounced Emerson to be, "the author who has been the richest in ideas in this century." Quoted by Chris Augusta in "Nietzsche's First Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson." Retrieved on October 6, 2021, from <https://merionwest.com/2019/05/21/nietzsches-first-man-ralph-waldo-emerson/>. Augusta explains Nietzsche's appreciation of Emerson as stemming from a shared understanding of existence as "neither a purely objective phenomenon nor a purely subjective one—but a dynamic of inner and outer forces." For both Emerson and Nietzsche, Augusta explains, existence "is a poetic phenomenon." Augusta has nothing to say of the sharp divergence in their thought when it comes to democracy.

Kateb, in his study of Emerson's thought, calls *democratic individualism*, a stance that seeks to celebrate individuality without undermining collective solidarity.<sup>5</sup> More hopeful than Nietzsche about the potential of ordinary men and women, they believed that genius would flourish in a democratic society if at least some individuals could only find the courage to defy public opinion and remain true to themselves.

On the other side of the Atlantic, John Stuart Mill, having read Tocqueville's portrait of democratic America, wrote despairingly about how the "moral coercion" of public opinion could induce a soul-chilling conformity inimical to the free-spirited individuality he regarded as essential to human well-being.<sup>6</sup> Mill justified giving persons of genius a protected social space in which to carry out their eccentric "experiments in living" by arguing that the improvement of the human condition depends on it. He believed that persons of genius contribute to the social utility by charting diverse paths to a better future, and all progress depends on their having the freedom to do so. Mill, a liberal icon, married his unabashed elitism to a respect for the dignity of each and every person and an egalitarian commitment to the well-being of all. Thus, his "one simple principle"—known to generations of university students as the harm principle—espouses a broad sphere of personal liberty for all, so long as no harm to others results from the use autonomous individuals make of their freedom. In fact, Mill did not expect most persons would choose to live as free-spirited individualists. He thought the vast majority were held back from developing their moral and intellectual potential by poverty, a limited education, and the lack of social mobility. But Mill had hope that over time liberal institutions and the gradual uptake of liberal values by a greater share of the population would eliminate these obstacles.

The optimism evinced by the likes of Emerson and Mill is arguably a persistent characteristic of the liberal mindset. In contrast, when it comes to the demos, Nietzsche was a pessimist. The common man's circumstances might be difficult, but what renders him an ignoble mediocrity

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<sup>5</sup> George Kateb, *Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978).



according to Nietzsche is the type of creature he is. Making him *free* (in Mill's sense) will not make him *better* (in any sense of the word). Moreover, the typical representative of the demos does not want to be free—not if freedom means escaping his herd life and shedding the herd's values.<sup>7</sup> With his views shaped as much by his physiology and biology as by his circumstances and socialization, the common man is what he is and will never be “more.” Consequently, his hostility toward and resentment of the superior individual will never abate. From Nietzsche's vantage point, it is useless to attempt to reconcile genius with liberal-democratic egalitarianism. There is no dignity in being a member of the herd, nor should the truly superior individual concern himself with the well-being of the masses. For Nietzsche, the genius is a world unto himself. He lives in perpetual rebellion against the values the herd seeks to impose upon him. His suffering at their hands becomes a mark of his superiority.

When Nietzsche gives examples of genius, he frequently lists Beethoven, Goethe, and himself.<sup>8</sup> If these are understood as representative examples, then it would seem his lament over the ascension of the herd and its values is chiefly aesthetic and what he wants is to embolden the extraordinarily talented few to stand against the throng. It amounts, then, to a kind of bohemian radicalism, a *cri de coeur* for the artist whose life and works (the two are really indistinguishable in Nietzsche's view) are beyond the comprehension of the boorish multitude. Again, per Leiter, there is little obvious political significance in this. The artistic genius thinks only of himself and his art, hoping perhaps to reveal the secret of his being to his elite peers but utterly indifferent to the impact his life and works have on his inferiors. He suffers the scorn of the masses with indifference; he bears their blows with fortitude.

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<sup>7</sup> In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche writes: “All sick and diseased people strive instinctively after a herd-organisation, out of a desire to shake off their sense of oppressive discomfort and weakness,” p. 176 (Sect. 18). Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2016. Retrieved September 27, 2021, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52319/52319-h/52319-h.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Leiter, op. cit.

## Nietzsche's Endorsement of Aristocracy and Its Implications

If this were Nietzsche's unequivocal teaching, we would expect his political legacy to be more like Emerson's or possibly Mill's—a celebration of individuality and a warning against conformism—albeit shorn of their more or less eager accommodation of the irresistible democratic tide. But of course, there are also notorious references in Nietzsche's writings to “blond beasts” who conquer and rule, displaying as much compassion for their abject subjects as eagles show to the “tasty lambs” on which they gorge themselves.<sup>9</sup> Images such as this give rise to a reading of Nietzsche that takes an artistic genius to include *political artistry*, in which the materials, to be expended as the artist sees fit, consist of inferior human beings.<sup>10</sup>

As if that were not enough, there is also Nietzsche's sympathetic treatment of ancient caste societies and even slavery to reckon with. In aphorism 257 of *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes: “EVERY elevation of the type ‘man,’ has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society and so it will always be—a society believing in a long scale of gradations of rank and differences of worth among human beings, and requiring slavery in some form or other.”<sup>11</sup> The compulsory sorting of men into different ranks within a rigid social hierarchy is what leads some men—those who are superior in both rank and character—to reflect upon their

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<sup>9</sup> These images famously occur in the first essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, op. cit., pp. 41–42 (Sect. 11); 45 (Sect. 13).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). In *The Will to Power*, sec. 960, Nietzsche writes: “The establishment has been made possible of international race unions which will set themselves the task of rearing a ruling race, the future “lords of the earth”—a new, vast aristocracy based upon the most severe self-discipline, in which the will of philosophical men of power and artist-tyrants will be stamped upon thousands of years: a higher species of men which, thanks to their preponderance of will, knowledge, riches, and influence, will avail themselves of democratic Europe as the most suitable and supple instrument they can have for taking the fate of the earth into their own hands, and working as artists upon man himself” (emphasis added). Retrieved on October 5, 2021, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52915/52915-h/52915-h.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Trans. Helen Zimmern (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2013). Retrieved September 27, 2021, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>.

own being and gain a new perspective on themselves, thus facilitating “the elevation of the type ‘man’.” Simply put, Nietzsche believes that, historically, dominion over others is what made possible the higher man’s dominion over himself and consequently the elevation of the human spirit in those who possessed strength of will. In aphorism 259 of the same work, Nietzsche contrasts this salutary aristocratic hierarchy with its democratic counterpart, in which men “refrain mutually from injury, from violence, from exploitation, and put one’s will on a par with that of others.” Established as the “fundamental principle of society,” this democratic mutuality reveals itself as “a Will to the DENIAL of life, a principle of dissolution and decay” because “life itself is ESSENTIALLY appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation.”<sup>12</sup>

Ronald Beiner pointedly remarks that Nietzsche’s willingness to relegate the idea of slavery as a *necessary* feature of cultures superior to modern democratic cultures “tells one things that are absolutely crucial for rightly apprehending the character of what ‘critique of modernity’ means in Nietzsche’s thought.”<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche’s visceral contempt for the public culture of modern democracy points in a different direction than does the fear of conformism expressed by the likes of Emerson and Mill. If one is serious about protecting the highest human types from their inferiors, egalitarianism and democratic values must be repudiated. Perhaps democracy itself must be undone.

Nietzsche’s racialized language and division of humanity into higher and lower types have made it all too easy for right-wing extremists to draw inspiration from his works.<sup>14</sup> This was true of Nazi race-purists in the mid-twentieth century and it is true of white supremacists today.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Alex Ross writes in *The New Yorker*: “However selective the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche may have been, it replicated elements of his thought. He did write that equality is the “greatest of all lies,” and divided humanity into a hierarchy of the weak and the strong. Hans Stark, the head of the admissions detail at Auschwitz, had a sign over his desk reading “Mitleid ist Schwäche” (‘Compassion Is Weakness’). This could be read as a crude condensation of Nietzsche’s diatribe against compassion in ‘The Antichrist.’” *The New Yorker*, October 14,

Nietzsche is a special favorite of the contemporary alt-right, which folds his cultural critique of modernity into a volatile mix of white identity politics, Christian nationalism, and anti-Semitism.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's defenders claim that this is a misapplication of his thought inasmuch as it misconstrues his views on race and overlooks his curt dismissal of both nationalism and anti-Semitism, not to mention his contempt for Christian morality. But arguably his defenders miss the point. Neo-fascists do not need Nietzsche to argue for white supremacy or denounce Jewish conspiracies. What they take from Nietzsche is his rejection of the normative underpinnings of modern democracy and his embrace of the notion that there is a hierarchy of human types within which persons of a certain description are vastly superior to the rest. The alleged worthlessness of the inferior types, a view to which Nietzsche himself subscribed, allows the alt-right to argue for their subordination or exclusion—just as it afforded the Nazis a rationale for their extermination.<sup>16</sup>

## From Fascism to Free Markets

Right-wing libertarians, zealous advocates of free-market capitalism who on the surface look worlds apart from the neo-fascists of the alt-right, also draw inspiration from Nietzsche. Ayn Rand, whose popular fiction is a gateway to libertarian ideology for many of her readers, was very

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2019, retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/10/14/nietzsches-eternal-return>.

<sup>15</sup> George Hawley writes in *Foreign Affairs*: “The alt-right is not a highbrow, sophisticated academic movement—it is still mostly an online mob of white nationalist trolls. Yet it would also be wrong to say that the alt-right possesses no philosophical foundation. It rests, first and foremost, on a Nietzschean rejection of democracy and egalitarianism.” Retrieved on October 6, 2021, from [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2017-10-27/european-roots-alt-right?utm\\_medium=promo\\_email&utm\\_source=lo\\_flows&utm\\_campaign=registered\\_user\\_welcome&utm\\_term=email\\_1&utm\\_content=20211006](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2017-10-27/european-roots-alt-right?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=email_1&utm_content=20211006).

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche's influence on fascism in general and the Nazis in particular is still much debated. Bruce Detwiler strikes the right note in my view when he acknowledges that Nietzsche's “aestheticized politics” displays a distinct affinity with fascism. Nietzsche, Detwiler points out, propounds “a politics of racial supremacy,” appears to advocate “the annihilation of millions of failures,” and argues “that the vast majority can find meaning and justification only by dedicating itself to the promotion of a higher sovereign species.” See *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 113.

much taken with Nietzsche as a young woman.<sup>17</sup> His influence shows in her best-selling novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. In *The Fountainhead*, a genius architect named Howard Roark must endure the envy of lesser men and violently fend off their attempts to thwart his artistic vision. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the indispensable contributions to human well-being provided by inventor-entrepreneur John Galt go unappreciated by the masses until he withdraws from society and denies the world the benefit of his genius. A long speech that Galt delivers in the course of the novel lays out Rand's egoistic philosophy extolling, as she puts it, "the virtue of selfishness."<sup>18</sup> Rand divides humankind into the exceptional few—the John Galts and Howard Roarks—and their natural inferiors. Among the lesser sorts there are those who dutifully defer to their betters and those who stubbornly refuse to accept their place in nature's hierarchy. The former group understands that the capitalist market rewards talent and gives to each his due, which (unbelievably in my view) makes them content with their lot; members of the latter group are consumed by envy. Denying to themselves that they are inferior, these "second-handers" preach equality and socialism. And they try to use the democratic state to overturn the natural order.

It is impossible to imagine Nietzsche embracing libertarianism, which treats its market-oriented conception of personal freedom as the highest human good. "Independence, free development, and *laissez aller* are clamoured for most violently precisely by those for whom no restraint could be too severe," he wrote in "Skirmishes in a War with the Age" (sec. 41), taking the modern obsession with the freedom to be "a symptom of decadence."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, like fascism, libertarianism riffs on a theme by Nietzsche. Fascism fastens onto Nietzsche's glorification of strength and will and sees a template for the future in the ancient aristocratic societies he so admires. Libertarianism likewise celebrates the heroic qualities

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<sup>17</sup> Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 2d edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 182–185.

<sup>18</sup> *The Virtue of Selfishness* is also the title of a collection of essays elaborating her philosophy published by Rand in 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness - A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> Retrieved on October 5, 2021, from [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52263/52263-h/52263-h.htm#SKIRMISHES\\_IN\\_A\\_WAR\\_WITH\\_THE\\_AGE](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52263/52263-h/52263-h.htm#SKIRMISHES_IN_A_WAR_WITH_THE_AGE).

that Nietzsche assigns to superior individuals but prefers to see them displayed in the competitive environment of the capitalist marketplace rather than on a battlefield. If fascism is Nietzscheanism for thugs, libertarianism is Nietzscheanism for the ideological heirs of Herbert Spenser and Horatio Alger.

Politically, fascism substitutes the leader-principle in place of democratic contestation. The people find their representation in the leader; their will is subsumed in his will. Identification with the leader imparts a semblance of the leader's personal superiority to the nation as a whole. He is an unparalleled genius; his subjects are the master race before whom all inferior races must bow. Fascism abhors the give and take of politics but it loves war, which affords superior individuals the opportunity to display their physical strength, force of will, and nobility of spirit. For their part, libertarians love not war but *competition*—the competition of the capitalist marketplace. The life and death struggle that validates the fascist's conviction of his own and his race's superiority is transmuted by libertarian ideology into the entrepreneur's quest for profit; the collective aspiration for a share in national greatness that sustains the fascist mentality is displaced by the valorization of the entrepreneur's personal self-aggrandizement. For the neo-fascist alt-right, it's the West against the rest in a battle of civilizations. For libertarians, it's every man for himself and the devil takes the hindmost. And while not everyone can be John Galt, it is enough that Galt wannabes are free to take their shot. Like Nietzsche, today's neo-fascists and libertarians respect power but have little use for participatory politics as it normally plays out under liberal auspices. Rather, they are in a sense *anti-political* inasmuch as they substitute the cult of the leader or the cult of the market in place of a genuine civic culture. And they harbor a special animus toward democracy because a democratic politics risks empowering inferior people, who can then wield state power against their natural superiors.

## From Libertarianism to the Alt-Right

The ultimate expression of the libertarian retreat from politics is *anarcho-capitalism*, a theory most prominently identified with Robert Friedman, son of Chicago-school economist Milton Friedman, and especially Murray Rothbard, a disciple of Austrian-school economist and arch-conservative Ludwig von Mises.<sup>20</sup> Anarcho-capitalism envisions a world in which there are no public goods whatsoever and all of the functions now entrusted to the government, including public safety and criminal justice, are entrusted to private entrepreneurs operating in an unregulated market on a subscription or fee for service basis. The magic of Adam Smith's invisible hand is expected to keep this fantastical social order from devolving into Hobbes's war of each against all.

Anarcho-capitalism is the doctrine of privatization much loved by free-market conservatives carried to its illogical extreme.<sup>21</sup> And it is here that the white supremacist agenda of the alt-right and the free-market fantasy of libertarianism intersect. The libertarian anarchist's abolition of politics would allow race-purists to come together to form their own utopian communities while ostensibly doing no injury to those persons excluded on account of their race. Restrictive covenants, after all, are simply voluntary agreements; and in a truly free-market property owners have an unrestricted right to make (or not to make) contracts with whomever they please and for whatever reasons they choose. Viewed from this perspective, racism is just another consumer preference; and the libertarian free-market caters to all preferences indifferently.

Rothbard, the theorist of anarcho-capitalism and a self-described *paleolibertarian* (a term chosen by its adherents to denote rejection of

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<sup>20</sup> Revered by modern libertarians because of his devotion to free markets, von Mises also displayed an affinity for fascism. In 1927, five years after Mussolini had come to power in Italy, he published a book titled *Liberalism*, in which he wrote this: "It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar movements aimed at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has for the moment saved European civilization." What fascism had "saved" Europe from was, of course, socialism. Quoted in Patrik Hermansson, "Libertarianism and the Alternative Right," May 3, 2018. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2018/03/05/libertarianism-alternative-right/>.

<sup>21</sup> See Stephen L. Newman, *Liberalism at Wits' End: The Libertarian Revolt Against the Modern State* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 75–91.

cosmopolitan cultural values), himself embodies this convergence of libertarianism and racism. Not surprisingly, he is revered by leading figures of the alt-right.<sup>22</sup> Although he briefly advocated an alliance between right-wing libertarians and the New Left in opposition to the state's militarism, Rothbard was never a fan of the left's embrace of civil rights. As a university student in the 1940s he was a supporter of segregationist and states' rights advocate Strom Thurmond. A vehement anti-communist, he also idolized Senator Joseph McCarthy and McCarthy's henchman Roy Cohen, professing admiration for their hardball tactics. Later in life, he welcomed the Republican candidacies of conservative culture warrior Patrick Buchanan and former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan David Duke. It was their "populist" style as well as their message that Rothbard admired. He wrote at the time that the proper strategy for the right was "what we can call 'right-wing populism': exciting, dynamic, tough, and confrontational, rousing and inspiring not only the exploited masses, but the often-shell-shocked right-wing intellectual cadre as well." He dismissed the nation's intellectual and media elites as "all in a deep sense one variety or another of social democrat, all bitterly hostile to a genuine Right." What was required to energize the right was "a dynamic, charismatic leader who has the ability to short-circuit the media elites, and to reach and rouse the masses directly,"

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<sup>22</sup> The list of alt-right luminaries who have expressed their admiration for Rothbard includes anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist Mike Enoch, founder of the "Daily Shoah" podcast; Chris Cantwell, the crying Nazi of the deadly Unite the Right march in Charlottesville; white supremacist Jared Taylor, editor of *American Renaissance*; white nationalist Peter Brimelow, founder of the anti-immigration website VDARE; and paleoconservative historian Paul Gottfried, who has been called the godfather of the alt-right. Rothbard's favorite disciple, Hans-Hermann Hoppe is the author of *Democracy: The God That Failed*, which *Jacobin* writer Erik Baker describes as having become something of a bible for the alt-right movement. A number of alt-right figures also acknowledge Rand as an influence, along with von Mises and other libertarian icons. See John Ganz, "The Forgotten Man: On Murray Rothbard, Philosophical Harbinger of Trump and the Alt-right," *The Baffler*, December 15, 2017, retrieved on September 22, 2021, from <https://thebaffler.com/latest/the-forgotten-man-ganz/>; and Erik Baker, "Why the Alt-Right Loves Nietzsche," *Jacobin Magazine*, retrieved on September 21, 2021, from <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/01/nietzsche-heidegger-ronald-beiner-far-right>. See also John Ganz, "Libertarians Have More in Common with the Alt-right than They Want You to Think," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2019, retrieved on September 21, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/09/19/libertarians-have-more-in-common-with-the-alt-right-than-they-want-you-to-think/>; and Patrik Hermansson, "Libertarianism and the Alternative Right," retrieved on September 22, 2021, from <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2018/03/05/libertarianism-alternative-right/>.



cutting through “the crippling and distorting hermeneutical fog spread by the media elites.”<sup>23</sup>

Recent times have witnessed the political ascendancy of just such a figure. He turns out not to be a dramatic persona on the order of Howard Roark or John Galt, but a self-glorifying salesman: Donald Trump. Trump, a real estate wheeler-dealer and sometime conman turned reality TV star, managed to defeat more seasoned and more conventional politicians to become the Republican Party candidate for president in 2016. He went on to win the general election in a campaign distinguished by his overtly racist disparagement of brown-skinned immigrants and blatant Islamophobia. Trump, who grandiosely boasts of (and possibly exaggerates) his wealth, incongruously presents himself as a man of the people, someone intent on defending the views and values of the “real America” against the imperious cosmopolitan liberalism of coastal elites. Declaring that America was broken and that he alone could fix it, this faux populist postured as the nation’s heroic savior. He promised to “make America great again,” a slogan vague enough to allow his audience to infer for themselves what greatness entails. There is no doubting what white supremacists thought it meant.

Not much of a reader and unlikely to be familiar with Rothbard’s oeuvre, Trump nonetheless intuitively recognized that popular resentment of elites among the white working class could be coopted by a person of his peculiar “genius.” Ever the canny salesman, he embraced and validated the feelings of his electoral base, all the better to sell them on his leadership. In what might or might not have been political theater, he took on their seething anger at the liberal establishment and built a political movement on their petty desire to “own the libs.” Trump’s extreme narcissism, which in the eyes of his critics disqualifies him as a leader, actually becomes a plus in the eyes of his base. In the words of Robert Kagan, “his supporters admire his unapologetic, militant selfishness.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Ganz in “The Forgotten Man: On Murray Rothbard, Philosophical Harbinger of Trump and the Alt-right,” op cit.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Kagan, “Our Constitutional Crisis Is Already Here,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 2021. Retrieved September 25, 2021 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/23/robert-kagan-constitutional-crisis/>

It is already a long way from Nietzsche's exemplars of artistic genius, Beethoven and Goethe, to John Galt. By the time we get to Trump's cheesy brand of "greatness" the distance seems truly immense. The Make America Great Again campaign is hardly a revolt against the slave morality that Nietzsche condemned in his *Genealogy of Morals*. On the contrary, Trump and his ilk celebrate conventional bourgeois values—material success as a good in and of itself, social standing linked to the accumulation of wealth, and freedom understood in terms of having a broad choice of consumer goods.

Despite its valorization of selfishness, Trumpism also manages to tie its cause to Christian moralism. Trump himself is remarkably popular with the evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics.<sup>25</sup> Some among the alt-right figures who saw in Trump's candidacy an implicit endorsement of their cause like to posture as Christian warriors fighting to restore the civilizational heritage of the West that they see as being under threat from enemies without and within. The decadence of Western culture is regarded as a danger no less severe than the rise of militant Islam.

Admittedly, there is something of Nietzsche in this last bit. He, too, perceived the decadence of Western culture as a disease likely to prove fatal. In "The Greek State," composed in 1871 but never published in his lifetime, Nietzsche wrote that

"The whole of the West no longer possesses the instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which a *future* grows. ...That which makes an institution an institution is despised, hated, repudiated: one fears the danger of a new slavery the moment the word 'authority' is even spoken aloud. That is how far decadence has advanced in the instincts of our politicians, of our political parties."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Polls taken on the even of the 2020 election showed that 8 in 10 white evangelicals said that they would vote for Trump. The same percentage consistently voiced support for Trump throughout his presidency. See Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Meraji, "The White Elephants In the Room," retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/17/935910276/the-white-elephants-in-the-room>. Catholic voters played a crucial role in Trump's 2016 electoral win. See "For Trump, Conservative Catholics Are the New Evangelicals," retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/26/926659149/for-trump-conservative-catholics-are-the-new-evangelicals>.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, op cit., pp. 41–42.

Nietzsche's essay goes on to contrast liberal democracy with the politics of classical antiquity, celebrating the latter on account of "the unconditional sacrifice of all other interests"<sup>27</sup> in service of the ancient Greek polis. The purity of what he calls "the political instinct" on display among the Greeks stands in stark contrast to the hodgepodge of doctrines involving racialism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, and Christianity that constitutes the ideology of the alt-right.

If the culture warriors of the alt-right are in some sense Nietzsche's disciples, they are waging war in the name of a cause Nietzsche himself would likely repudiate. Not, however, because of their willingness to trample the weak underfoot—Nietzsche had no sympathy for weak specimens of humanity—but because he would regard their cause as no less decadent, no less nihilistic, and no less banal, than the modern political democracy it rebels against.<sup>28</sup>

## Nietzsche, the Far Right, and the Crisis of the West

As Nietzsche saw things, Western civilization is in crisis because its god is dead and consequently the meaning bestowed by Christianity—and all that followed from it in terms of art, morals, and metaphysics—is collapsing. This crisis is profound but not acute. There is little likelihood of Western institutions crumbling tomorrow or the next day. But crumble they must at some point because the intellectual resources possessed by Western culture are no longer capable of infusing the world with meaning. The skeptical legacy of Enlightenment reason is good at one thing only: deconstructing and debunking the value-laden beliefs that gave purpose to people's lives. The ever-present danger confronting modernity is nihilism; the desperate need of humanity is value-creation.

This is why Nietzsche focused his attention on the "superman," the man of superior genius whose artistry would allow him to forge new

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> In book 5 of *The Gay Science* (sec. 377), Nietzsche, commenting on the politics of Germany in his own time, excoriates the nationalism and race hatred "that are desolating the German spirit by making it vain and that is, moreover, *petty* politics." Quoted in Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, op cit., p. 60.

values and whose strength of will would enable him to impose these values on the world. This theme recurs throughout his writings. As Bruce Detwiler observes, Nietzsche's texts are filled with references to a "higher type" of man, a "higher aristocracy" of the future, the coming "master race," a "higher sovereign species," the "dominating race," the "ruling race," and so on. For Detwiler, this reveals the *spiritual* essence of Nietzsche's politics. In his reading, Nietzsche envisions an aristocracy of superior human types governed by the will of the highest human type, the philosophical genius/artist, who will treat the rest of humankind as raw material upon which to work. While Nietzsche never details the political structure of this new order, clearly it will be illiberal and undemocratic.<sup>29</sup>

Nietzsche has contempt for liberalism and democracy because in his eyes both are symptomatic of the spiritual crisis afflicting the West. The demos is a herd of complacent animals who aspire to nothing greater than mediocrity and take comfort in the sameness of their drab lives. This in itself is bad enough, but more terrible is the fact that they would drag superior persons down to their level. Democratic egalitarianism and the liberal doctrine of universal human rights present obstacles to the emergence of higher human types, the future master race that for Nietzsche represents the only possible solution to the crisis brought about by the death of god. Critique is not prescription, however, and Nietzsche falls short as a political theorist by failing to address how the new aristocratic order will emerge from the decadence and nihilism of the old order, much less what can be done to hurry its arrival. Small wonder, then, that his admirers on the extreme right are tempted to pick up his acerbic critique of liberal democracy and marry it to a welter of strategies that range from conventional electioneering to rabble-rousing to armed insurrection.

Nietzsche is above all a radical critic of what he regarded as the decaying verities on which the modern democratic public culture stands. Importantly, this is not really true of his imitators on the extreme right, who remain attached to many of the shibboleths Nietzsche did his best to

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<sup>29</sup> Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, op. cit., at pp. 99 – 100. Cf. Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, op. cit., pp. 36 – 39.

explode. Thus, the disciples of Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard eagerly buy into the notion that heroic entrepreneurs in the image of John Galt are Nietzschean supermen, oblivious to the way their caricature of what Nietzsche understood by artistic genius betrays his insistence on the need for genuinely new values to replace the idols of the capitalist marketplace. Likewise, the culture warriors of the alt-right seize on Nietzsche's diagnosis of civilizational collapse seemingly without comprehending that the Western heritage they seek to protect from a host of "enemies" (Islam, liberalism, socialism, humanism, multiculturalism, etc.) is for Nietzsche the root cause of the problem. Again, for Nietzsche, the spiritual crisis of the West is much larger than politics, which might be categorized as epiphenomenal in relation to the death of god and subsequently metastasis of nihilism.

There are good reasons to believe, however, that the immediate crisis of our times—the crisis symptomized and deepened by right-wing extremism—is expressly political. It stems from a loss of faith in democratic institutions, an erosion of civic norms of tolerance and reciprocity, and the substitution of an identity-based politics that tends to harden societal divisions in place of an interest-based politics that is conducive to fluid political coalitions and generally supportive of positive attitudes toward diversity.

## **The Crisis of Democracy and the Nietzschean Moment on the Right**

America in the early nineteenth century was the epicenter of a transformative democratic social revolution inaugurated by the democratic political revolution of 1776. The new nation's distinctively egalitarian social ethos foretold the world to come, and soonest for European nations in which democratic forces were gathering strength. Class lines were more permeable in America than they were in Europe and status distinctions mattered less owing to greater social mobility. There were ethnic and religious antagonisms, of course, but these were largely kept in check by broad access to the franchise and legal guarantees of religious freedom. Where you came from and what church you belonged to did

not substantially hinder your participation in civic life. Only race and gender barred entry to the public realm on more or less equal terms with everyone else.

At the core of America's democratic civic culture lay an abiding faith in democracy itself. Democratic institutions and democratic ideals are what united a diverse people who may have had little else in common. Successive waves of immigration throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth severely tested the foundation of America's civic culture, but repeatedly the nation doubled down on its faith in democracy. America was said to be a melting pot where new immigrants lost their foreignness and became indistinguishable from the immigrants who had arrived before them. All they needed to do was learn English and sign up to vote. The assimilationist moral of this story is ultimately more important than its historical accuracy.<sup>30</sup> By framing American identity almost exclusively in political terms, the myth of the melting pot implicitly acknowledges that the nation's democratic civic culture is what binds it together.

What is so terribly disturbing about the present moment in American politics is the unsettling of this identity and the apparent willingness of so many, both established politicians and ordinary voters, to abandon their commitment to an inclusive democracy. The racial and "civilizational" issues of importance to the extreme right have been taken up by the mainstream, as evidenced by candidate Trump's racist and bigoted language when he denounced illegal immigration and spoke against the alleged threat posed by "radical Islam." That Trump did not reverse course after he was elected is evidence of an ominous trend, further reflected in the wholesale movement of the Republican Party in the same direction. Most troubling of all, millions of Americans responded enthusiastically to Trump's divisive rhetoric. Ominously, in the wake of his failed bid for re-election in 2020, Trump and the Republican Party refused to concede graciously. Instead, Trump and his supporters accused the Democrats of having stolen the election. It was an outrageous lie.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press; Revised ed., 2002) for a more nuanced discussion of the American melting pot.

Nonetheless, Trump *and over fifty percent of Republican voters* continue to this day to insist that he is the rightful president!<sup>31</sup>

On January 6, 2021, hundreds of Trump supporters, incited by Trump himself, rampaged through the U.S. Capitol in a futile effort to halt the Electoral College vote count and prevent Democrat Joe Biden's victory from being ratified.<sup>32</sup> Yet even after being compelled to flee the Senate Chamber to escape the mob, six Republican Senators subsequently voted to sustain an objection to Arizona's vote count, in effect siding with the insurrectionists. Later, when the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives impeached the president over the events of January 6, they had the support of only ten of their Republican colleagues. In the Senate, only seven Republicans voted with their Democratic peers to find Trump guilty of the charge contained in the bill of impeachment, far short of the seventeen Republican votes needed to convict him.

Sober analysts of American politics now regard one of the nation's two major political parties to be openly anti-democratic.<sup>33</sup> Republican readiness to trivialize or dismiss the January 6 insurrection is surely proof of this, but there is also more substantial evidence. Between January 1 and September 27, at least 19 states with Republican legislatures enacted 33 laws that make it harder for Americans to vote. And according to the Brennan Center for Justice, which tracks these things, "[m]ore than 425 bills with provisions that restrict voting access have been introduced in

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<sup>31</sup> "CNN Poll: Most Americans feel democracy is under attack in the US," September 15, 2021. Retrieved on October 15, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/15/politics/cnn-poll-most-americans-democracy-under-attack/index.html>.

<sup>32</sup> On February 6, 2022 the Republican Party censured two of their own members, Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for participating in the inquiry into the deadly riot by Trump supporters at the Capitol. The resolution of censure officially declared the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol and events that led to it "legitimate political discourse." See the report in the New York Times, retrieved on February 7, 2022, from [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/republicans-jan-6-cheney-censure.html?action=click&algo=bandit-all-surfaces\\_impression\\_cut\\_3\\_filter\\_new\\_arm\\_5\\_1&alpha=0.05&block=more\\_in\\_recirc&fallback=false&imp\\_id=450872713&impression\\_id=286d9075-886b-11ec-8c88-dfe17c39a342&index=5&pgtype=Article&pool=more\\_in\\_pools%2Fpolitics&region=footer&req\\_id=504583890&surface=cos-more-in&variant=0\\_bandit-all-surfaces\\_impression\\_cut\\_3\\_filter\\_new\\_arm\\_5\\_1](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/republicans-jan-6-cheney-censure.html?action=click&algo=bandit-all-surfaces_impression_cut_3_filter_new_arm_5_1&alpha=0.05&block=more_in_recirc&fallback=false&imp_id=450872713&impression_id=286d9075-886b-11ec-8c88-dfe17c39a342&index=5&pgtype=Article&pool=more_in_pools%2Fpolitics&region=footer&req_id=504583890&surface=cos-more-in&variant=0_bandit-all-surfaces_impression_cut_3_filter_new_arm_5_1).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Zack Beauchamp, "The Republican revolt against democracy, explained in 13 charts," retrieved on February 7, 2022, from <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22274429/republicans-anti-democracy-13-charts>.

49 states in the 2021 legislative sessions.”<sup>34</sup> By and large these measures target Democratic constituencies.<sup>35</sup> More such efforts are underway, including measures that will make it easier for state legislatures to overrule local boards of elections when they are unhappy with the vote count. This was a central bone of contention in 2020 when state and local election officials—many of them Republicans!—refused to “find” additional votes for Trump and stood by the official results when the count was challenged by the Trump campaign. Such “disloyalty” is no longer tolerated by today’s Republican Party.<sup>36</sup>

The current political crisis builds on a social and economic crisis decades in the making. The extreme polarization of the American electorate reflects a deep divide rending the nation’s social fabric. To simply things just a little, on one side of this divide we find a convergence of certain economic elites and knowledge workers, the so-called “creative class”; on the other we find a different set of economic elites, religious conservatives, and (to the dismay of the left) a huge slice of the white working class. The first of these coalitions is cosmopolitan in its outlook and politically liberal, while the second is more parochial in orientation and increasingly open to what not all that long ago were considered extreme right-wing views. The ascendancy of the former, which dominates the new high-tech economy, controls the institutions of higher learning, and pretty much runs the culture industry, antagonizes the latter, which resents its dwindling influence, diminished life chances, and loss of status. Trump and his allies have been able to exploit the resentment felt by those who see themselves on the losing side of things.<sup>37</sup> They

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<sup>34</sup> Retrieved on October 15, 2021, from <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2021>.

<sup>35</sup> “US democracy on the brink: Republicans wage ‘coordinated onslaught’ on voting rights,” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2021. Retrieved on October 15, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/24/democracy-under-attack-america-us-voting-rights-republicans>.

<sup>36</sup> The *New York Times* reported on October 18, 2021 that roughly 40 percent of Republicans say they consider themselves to be primarily Trump’s supporters rather than supporters of the party and nearly two-thirds of Republicans say their party should not be accepting of elected officials who criticize Trump. Retrieved on October 18, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/17/us/politics/trump-voter-fraud-republicans.html>. The cult of personality forming around the former president is not particularly Nietzschean, but it is disturbingly authoritarian and bodes ill for democracy’s prospects of surviving the Trump era.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. David Brooks, “Blame the Bobos,” *The Atlantic*, September 2021, pp. 56–66.



have had help from the explosive growth of a vast social media culture devoted to stoking the right's anger and sense of loss.<sup>38</sup>

America is not Europe, but there is ample evidence to suggest that democracy is in crisis on both sides of the Atlantic and for similar reasons. In the present moment, Nietzsche's contempt for democracy along with his bitter critique of liberal modernity hold particular appeal for the pseudo-intellectuals of the extreme right. Their hope is that we are approaching a turning point in history, a Nietzschean moment if you will, when it might be possible to reverse the course taken by Western civilization. This is pure fantasy, of course. But a move in the direction of what has been called *illiberal democracy* cannot be ruled out. Extreme polarization of the electorate is destabilizing the civic culture and authoritarianism is on the rise in both Europe and the United States.<sup>39</sup>

## Embracing Ressentiment

What is lost in the latest appropriation of Nietzsche by the extreme right is Nietzsche's concern for the fate of genius in the modern age. It pays to bear in mind that both his rejection of democracy and celebration of aristocracy flow organically out of his conception of genius as something rare and precious. He shared with nineteenth-century contemporaries like Emerson and Mill a belief that the human spirit flowers in a gifted few

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<sup>38</sup> Renée DiResta, "Right-Wing Social Media Finalizes Its Divorce From Reality," *The Atlantic*, November 23, 2020. Retrieved on October 6, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/right-wing-social-media-finalizes-its-divorce-reality/617177/>. Amanda Marcotte, "The Alt-right Isn't Dead: It Was Just Taken over by Fox News," *Salon*, December 6, 2018. Retrieved on October 6, 2021, from <https://www.salon.com/2018/12/06/the-alt-right-isnt-dead-it-was-just-taken-over-by-fox-news/>.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Anne Applebaum, "The Autocrats are Winning," *The Atlantic*, 328:5 (December 2021), pp. 42–50; and Zselyke Csaky, "Nations in Transit 2021: The Antidemocratic Turn," retrieved on January 1, 2022, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2021/antidemocratic-turn>. It deserves to be noted that the United States stands out among nations experiencing the detrimental effects of polarization, according to "What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?," a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report written by Jennifer McCoy of Georgia State and Benjamin Press of the Carnegie Endowment. Retrieved January 25, 2022, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190>.

for whom the conformist mentality of the many, which exerts extraordinary influence in a democratic society, is a threat to be overcome. Nietzsche's diagnosis of the problem parts ways with those offered by Emerson and Mill because he ties the rise of democracy to the existential crisis brought on by the death of god and consequently to nihilism. This gives an apocalyptic tenor to his castigation of the herd mentality and raises the stakes when it comes to the fate of true genius, those persons who represent the highest potential that resides in the species. It is from this quasi-Aristotelian, quasi-Darwinian point of view that Nietzsche condemns democracy and egalitarianism and offers an unabashed justification of aristocracy and slavery.

The politics of the extreme right, on the other hand, is a politics rooted in *ressentiment*. This is something Nietzsche would have understood very well. The self-proclaimed Nietzscheans of the extreme right seek to mobilize the demos, or at any rate a disgruntled portion of the demos, in opposition to societal elites whose privileges are regarded as unjust and whose values are deemed antithetical to the conventional pieties embraced by those who consider themselves to be the salt of the earth. There is no pathos of distance here. The soul-sickened herd and its leaders are on the same level. The goal is not to elevate genius, but to triumph over other members of the herd whose differences from oneself (be they racial or socio-economic) are superficial from Nietzsche's standpoint. For the epigone who stand in Nietzsche's shadow, however, the narcissism of minor differences is what separates the master race from less worthy specimens of humanity. Theirs is a world in which Goethe and Beethoven bow to Donald Trump.

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# The Genealogy of Socialist Morality: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Nietzsche, G.A. Cohen and the Argumentative Value of Moral Disgust

Ben Burgis

The extent to which Nietzsche's philosophy flowed from his deeply reactionary political impulses is a matter of scholarly dispute.<sup>1</sup> The fact that he *had* such impulses is not. He was horrified by the Paris Commune. He tended to equate the aspiration for a more egalitarian social order with a desire for humanity to be reduced to a crowd of blinking Last Men anaesthetized by their collective contentment.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Leiter, for example, seems to endorse the "Anti-Politics View" according to which Nietzsche "occasionally expresses views about political matters but, read in context, they do not add up to a theoretical account of any of the questions of political philosophy." Nietzsche, he suggests, has "views about human flourishing" that he seeks to communicate "at least to a select few" but doesn't believe that a particular form of social or political organization can be designed to enable more people to flourish (Leiter 2021).

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And yet, here's Emma Goldman, an ardent advocate of stateless communism who believed that "political freedom without corresponding economic inequality is an empty boast," on her experience of reading Nietzsche:

The magic of his language, the beauty of his vision, carried me to undreamed-of heights. I longed to devour every line of his writings, but I was too poor to buy them. Fortunately Grossmann had a supply of Nietzsche and other moderns.

I had to do my reading at the expense of much-needed sleep; but what was physical strain in view of my raptures over Nietzsche? The fire of his soul, the rhythm of his song, made life richer, fuller, and more wonderful for me. (Goldman 1970, p. 348)

Goldman shrugged off any apparent tension between her beloved "poet-philosopher" and her own fierce commitment to egalitarianism by arguing that "Nietzsche was not a social theorist" but "a rebel and an innovator" and enthuses about him "hurling anathemas against old values" (Goldman 1970, p. 391 and pp. 347–348). One level, this is all a big maddening. If a revolutionary socialist praises someone as a "rebel," does that imply at least some level of identification with the rebel's cause? Before someone who dedicates her life to bringing about a better world goes around celebrating a philosopher's battle against "old values," shouldn't she pause to ask herself what kind of world is being pointed to by whatever *new* values the philosopher has to offer?

That said, I have to admit that I nodded along when I read those passages of Goldman's memoir *Living My Life*. I'm not an anarchist but I was already a convinced Marxist when I read *The Genealogy of Morals* as an undergraduate—and even so I had a more-or-less Goldmanesque reaction to what I was reading.<sup>2</sup>

There are certainly ways of understanding Marxism that would be easy to reconcile with a basically sympathetic reaction to the *Genealogy*. Take one of the most memorable passages from the First Essay of that book:

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<sup>2</sup> Granted, even at the height of my Nietzsche reading, I seriously doubt I would have broken up with a girlfriend for speaking disrespectfully about Nietzsche's books—the reason Goldman gives in her memoir for dumping her boyfriend Ed.

Dante, I think, committed a crude blunder when, with terror-inspiring ingenuity, he placed above the gateway of his hell the inscription "I too was created by eternal love"-at any rate, there would be more justification for placing above the gateway to the Christian Paradise and its "eternal bliss" the inscription "I too was created by eternal hate"-provided a truth may be placed above the gateway to a lie For *what* is it that constitutes the bliss of this Paradise?

We might even guess, but it is better to have it expressly described for us by an authority not to be underestimated in such matters, Thomas Aquinas, the great teacher and saint. "*Beati in regno coelesti*," he says, meek as a lamb, "*videbunt poenas damnatorum, ut beatitudo nus magis complaceat*" ("The blessed in the kingdom of heaven will see the punishments of the damned, *in order that their bliss be more delightful for them.*") (Nietzsche 1967, pp. 47–48)

On the most basic level, many Marxists (including Karl Marx) have been militant atheists and it's obvious enough why a militant atheist would like what Nietzsche is doing here. There are also features of the particular *version* of militant atheism adopted by many socialists, communists, and labor radicals over the centuries that are particularly relevant here.

The suggestion that promises of an afterlife are a way of coaxing the oppressed and exploited into accepting their lot has deep roots in the socialist tradition. Think about Marx talking about religious consolation as a form of "illusory happiness," the flowers adorning workers' chains—which should be rejected "not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower." Or the early twentieth-century trade unionists who would sing "The Preacher and the Slave," a song written by martyred labor radical Joe Hill. The refrain was, "You'll get pie in the sky when you die—*that's a lie!*"

Moving from Heaven to Earth, though, we can find an even more interesting point of overlap between Nietzsche's project in the *Genealogy* and the self-understanding of many Marxists. Even if he can't catch them red-handed like Thomas Aquinas, Nietzsche thinks he can detect a core of raw sadism behind the high-minded rationalizations offered by even



secular philosophers for the punishments dished out by the criminal justice system.

The idea, now so obvious, apparently so natural, even unavoidable, that had to serve as the explanation of how the sense of justice ever appeared on earth—"the criminal deserves punishment *because* he could have acted differently"—is in fact an extremely late and subtle form of human judgment and inference: whoever transposes it to the beginning is guilty of a crude misunderstanding of the psychology of more primitive mankind. Throughout the greater part of human history punishment was *not* imposed *because* one held the wrong-doer responsible for his deed, thus *not* on the presupposition that only the guilty one should be punished: rather, as parents punish their children, from anger at some harm or injury, vented on the one Who caused it—but this anger is held in check and modified by the idea that every injury has its *equivalent* and can actually be paid back, even if only through the *pain* of the culprit. And whence did this primeval deeply rooted, perhaps by now ineradicable idea draw its power—this idea of an equivalence between injury and pain? I have already divulged it: in the contractual relationship between *creditor* and *debtor*, which is as old as the idea of "legal subjects" and in turn points back to the fundamental forms of buying, selling, barter, trade, and traffic (Nietzsche 1967, p. 63)

This is emotionally powerful stuff. It makes me squirm, thinking about my own propensity to moral anger and the visceral desire I've sometimes felt to see wrongdoers get what's coming to them. Is that really just a prettied-up expression of something that could be most simply expressed as *I'll enjoy your pain and you owe me some*—the sort of thing that might be said if two of the cenobites from *Hellraiser* were engaged in a bit of haggling?

I've assigned extracts that include that passage to my own students several times since I first read it because I think it's healthy and good (and productive for interesting class discussions) for them to squirm in the same way. But is there anything like an argument there? God knows how many tens of thousands of pages have been written making philosophical arguments and counterarguments about whether (even if we live in a deterministic universe) it can still make sense to attribute to human

beings the kind of free will that's required for moral responsibility. The justification of punishment is a further issue, since believe in objective moral responsibility is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one for making sense of retributivism—the position that punishment is justified by the simple fact that the criminal *deserves* to be punished, as opposed to utilitarian justifications for punishment, justifications based on some ideal of restorative justice, and so on.

But Nietzsche skips all of that. His message to the retributivist is, essentially, *Who are you fooling? I've got your number*. If you're (a) an analytic philosopher who is also (b) interested in moral reasoning, it can be very easy to write this off as Not An Argument and leave it at that—although I'll argue below that this would be too quick.

Meanwhile, I'm interested in why both Nietzsche's methodology and his conclusions might appeal to some readers who are neither (a) nor (b) but who *are* (c) fully immersed in a certain well-established variety of socialist (and often specifically Marxist) thought that only approaches moral questions from the standpoint of "ideology critique." The charlatans in *The Preacher and the Slave* who tries to tell the workers they'll have pie in the sky when they die are introduced as a "long-haired preachers" to "comes out every night" and "try to tell you what's wrong and what's right."

We could interpret the basis of Joe Hill's derision for the long-haired preachers (also referred to as "holy rollers" and "jumpers") as a disagreement about *which specific things* are wrong and which ones are right. But my strong sense is that his intention is to roll his eyes at the whole project of going around telling people what's wrong and what's right. The intellectual Marxist version of this impulse is often expressed as the thought that moral theories are never anything but ideological rationalizations for material interests and the correct way to explode them is to expose their class basis (their, ahem, "genealogy") rather than to try to show exactly the respects in which they're morally misguided.

A different approach comes from the late Canadian philosopher G.A. Cohen, who was (a) and (b) *and* (c)—a committed Marxist who was also an analytic philosopher and who was specifically interested, especially at the end of his life, in *moral* reasoning. His view was that moral justifications for the *status quo* may indeed often be rationalizations of

the material self-interests of the master class, just as capitalist propaganda might often include lying misrepresentations of empirical facts (e.g., about what happens during strikes), but that just as exposing lying propaganda on empirical issues involves showing what *really* happened, exploding ideological rationalizations should involve putting forward a better moral view.

This is often misconstrued by Cohen's lazier Marxist critics as an attempt to interpret Marxism as or reduce Marxism to a moral theory rather than a theory of the material world, but that's flatly wrong. Cohen's most iconic book (*Karl Marx's Theory of History*) was an extended defense of historical materialism as a theory of ordinary non-moral historical facts. There were elements of that defense he reconsidered or watered down later in his career, not because he now understood Marxism to *be* a moral theory but rather because of purely empirical doubts about those elements of his previous interpretation and defense of Marxism as a theory of social reality. In the introduction to the 2000 edition of that book—the one that includes all of his reservations and reconsiderations—Cohen lays out his strong commitment to “scientific socialism” understood as the project of (“at least among other things”) “the study of the nature of, and the route to, socialism, using the most advanced resources of social science, and within the frame of a socialist commitment” (Cohen 2000b, pp. xx–vii).

That last bit about the “frame of a socialist commitment” takes us straight to the actual relationship of what Cohen called “Analytical Marxism” and normative reasoning. (I'll use “Analytic Marxism” from here on out in accordance with the more common convention of referring to Cohen's preferred style of philosophical investigation as “analytic” rather than “analytical” philosophy.) The key distinction here is a Humean one. Theories of the social world are theories of *facts* and theories of justice are theories of *values*. Scientific socialism, Cohen suggests, is ultimately something like an engineering science—one where we're interested in discovering those facts that will be helpful to us given certain background goals. Medical science, for example, might one day be able to tell us how to extend the average human lifespan to 500 years but it won't be able to tell us whether this is a desirable goal.

A theory of how social classes relate to each other, how a given society's relations of production give rise to its legal and political superstructure, how those relations of production themselves rise and fall in different historical epochs, and so on is—like medical science—an empirical theory. But no less than medical science it's only one we're interested in because of background normative goals. And the desirability of socialism is far more controversial than the desirability of a long life. Cohen might not have thought "Marxism" (understood as "scientific socialism") *was* a normative theory, but he certainly thought that Marx and later Marxists *had normative commitments* and that rigorously examining those commitments, arguing for them and against rival commitments and so on was a worthwhile intellectual project. I'll be taking that project as one component of the much broader set of concerns—like Cohen's work on the materialist theory of history, or for example his fellow Analytic Marxism Erik Olin Wright's sociological investigations into class—subsumed under the label "Analytic Marxism" in what follows.

The simplest and most accessible expression of Cohen's socialist moral commitments came in the very short book (*Why Not Socialism?*) that was published the year he died. He starts by asking readers to investigate a very boringly normal case of a group of friends going on a camping trip—the kinds different groups of friends go on in the real world all the time. Everyone participates in the work that needs to be done (pitching tents, going fishing, making fires to fry the fish, and so on) and everyone partakes of the results in an egalitarian way. This looks rather strikingly like a miniature model of a very advanced socialist economy—in fact, rather like the "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" that Marx thought would exist in the higher stage of a communist society once material scarcity had been eliminated (Marx 1875).

Next, Cohen asks the reader to imagine a bizarre version of a camping trip where the campers start asserting various kinds of capitalist property rights in just the way that libertarian philosophers believe that people can gain a right to given pieces of property—by being the original discoverer of some piece of unowned property or inheriting one from someone with a legitimate claim to it, or simply striking a good bargain.

For example, one of the campers (Sylvia) finds an apple tree. Visions of apple sauce and apple strudel start to dance in the others' heads before Sylvia brings them down to earth. They can certainly have some of the apples from her tree, she confirms—"provided, of course...that you reduce my labor burden, and/or provide me with more room in the tent, and/or with more bacon at breakfast" (Cohen 2009, p. 8). Another asserts exclusive rights to fish in a pond dug by his grandfather and two others bargain for a greater share of the resources of their mini-society on the basis of innate or acquired skills.

Cohen clearly feels moral disgust with the dystopian capitalist version of the camping trip and hopes that his readers will too—just as Nietzsche clearly feels and hopes to share his deep disgust at the attitude of Thomas Aquinas. In both cases, a mirror is being held up to a set of values so readers will recoil and realize that their own values diverge from what they're seeing in important ways. That is, at last, the way I feel sure that Cohen would see what he's doing. The exegetical question is more complicated with regard to Nietzsche, but anyone who reads the passages from the *Genealogy* quoted above and hopes that they're in the presence of what at least *could* be a good argument *should* reconstruct the point in much the same way. It's hard to unpack *your ideas that have unsavory origins so they should be rejected* in a way that doesn't commit the Genetic Fallacy. If it turned out that early interest in Big Bang Cosmology were driven by the carefully concealed desire of Christian physicists to establish the empirical premise of a First Cause argument for the existence of God, this by itself wouldn't give us any reason to think that the physical universe *didn't* originate in a Big Bang singularity. (At best, we'd have a reason to take another look at the evidence to make sure they weren't cooking the books—though even there it could be that the initial evidence was forged but sufficient evidence that was provided at a later date.) On the other hand, *we can trace the origin of this moral judgment to a value system you instinctively reject on closer inspection* actually can be a logically respectable step on the road to *a different judgment that would better reflect your deepest moral concerns*.

Of course, our two mirror-holders have very different agendas. Nietzsche's own preferred value system was profoundly inegalitarian. He seems to have mostly been concerned with the special flourishing of

artists and other great men, and to have had (at best) very little interest in designing a less cruel society either for the benefit of these exceptional individuals—who can perhaps be expected to have their great souls forged by hardship in any case—or for the benefit of anyone else. The conclusions that Cohen draws from his own exercise in mirror-holding are centered on a compassionate and egalitarian vision of economic justice.

He objects to the advantages campers in the dystopian capitalist version of the trip can gain from various forms of dumb luck (discovery, inherited property, and so on) on the basis of a principle called *socialist equality of opportunity* which indicts social institutions to the extent that they tend to produce inequalities that are linked to the factors outside of the control of the disadvantaged (whether we're talking about disadvantage in the end-state distribution of resources or of underlying economic power). Again, Cohen wants to hold up a mirror to the values of defenders of capitalism—at least the ones who aren't too blinded by self-interest or ideology to be capable of seeing the point—in this case by showing that what they so often claim to care about (equality of opportunity) is, at least in the deepest sense in which an equality of opportunity principle could be understood, *incompatible* with capitalism.

Of course, a major theme of Marx's theory of history is that what kind of society even *can* exist at any point in history is a function of the material development of that society's "forces of production" (roughly, its capacity to produce the things people need) and not just ideas in the heads of people who live in it. Socialism can't exist without the forces of production being first adequately developed by capitalism, and Marx thought socialism as it emerged from capitalism would still have to involve some inequality for the sake of incentives and only slowly grow into the higher-phase communism of "from each...to each." Cohen himself thought the closest we could come to completely instantiating socialist equality of opportunity in the near future (while we figure out, if we can, how to "make the wheels run" for socialist planning) might be some form of market socialism falling short of even Marx's projected first phase. But the socialist equality of opportunity principle, and a second principle of communal caring—such that even when misfortune results

from free choices, it shouldn't result in devastation—act as a kind of ideological north star allowing us to tell what counts as social progress in the first place. Capitalism with strong unions and a strong social democratic welfare state counts is better than capitalism in its natural state, market socialism is better than capitalism, and (well-designed) socialist planning is even better than that because each better approximates those principles than the one before.

Cohen often expressed his frustration with Marxists who were unwilling to think through such moral commitments and to do the hard work of exposing them to philosophically rigorous examination. For example, in his Gifford Lectures (anthologized as *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*) he recounts a trip to Cold War-era Prague to visit his aunt Jennie Fried (his father's sister) and her husband Norman.

They were there because Norman was at the time an editor of *World Marxist Review*, the now defunct Prague-based theoretical journal of the also now defunct international communist movement. [...] One evening, I raised a question about the relationship between justice, and indeed moral principles more generally, and communist political practice. The question elicited a sardonic response from Uncle Norman. "Don't talk to me about morality," he said, with some contempt. "I'm not interested in morals." The tone and context of his words gave them this force: "Morality is ideological eyewash; it has nothing to do with the struggle between capitalism and socialism."

In response to Norman's "Don't talk to me about morals," I said: "But, Uncle Norman, you're a life-long communist. Surely your political activity reflects a strong moral commitment?"

"It's nothing to do with morals," he replied, his voice now rising in volume. "I'm fighting for my class!" (Cohen 2000a, p. 101)

Predictably, this devolved into an argument about whether there was any meaningful sense in which Norman was a member of the working class. We can put aside that question about Uncle Norman's sociological self-awareness to ask more interesting questions about his intellectual self-awareness. Whatever we think about the class status of globe-trotting magazine editors, let's just go ahead and that Norman spent his entire

life in a garment factory until one day he keeled over from a heart attack on the factory floor. His communist commitments would then be an unambiguous reflection of the interests of his class. But why should that be what he cared about?

Making some statistically safe assumptions about who Cohen's Aunt Jennie was most likely to marry—and I'll go ahead and extend my apologies in advance to any descendants Norman and Jennie might have if I'm getting any of this wrong—Norman would have also been a member of (a) the nation of Canada, (b) the province of Quebec, and (c) the Jewish people. Why was the collective he picked to identify with the working class? Why socialism and not Canadian nationalism or Zionism? (French-Canadian Catholic culture having been something less than maximally multi-culturally welcoming in the early twentieth century, Uncle Norman's Jewishness may have made him feel a bit less like a full part of the right collective identity for him to opt for Quebecois nationalism.)

To be sure, Norman could argue that these other entities didn't have collective interests in any particularly meaningful way—that national interests are a smokescreen for class interests—and I'd be the last person to deny that there's a considerable amount of truth to that but, even putting aside any uncomfortable extent to which national citizenship *is* interest-conferring in some situations after all, it's also worth honing in on what such claims amount to in the first place. Is the point that *individual* interests are tracked by class distinctions and not ethnic or national ones? If so—and, again, even overlooking any inconvenient caveats that we might have to be added to that sweeping statement on closer investigation—we're approaching a much bigger problem.

Class *does* structure quite a bit of individual interest. To be a worker under capitalism is to be disenfranchised to a very great extent—depending on complicating factors like the possession of rare skills that can confer a greater level of individual bargaining power, or labor organization that can confer some collective bargaining power, or the political achievement of a regulatory state conferring a kind of highly indirect power over capital—in the determination of a great many questions with great importance to your life. How many hours do you have to work? What conditions will you work in? How will the proceeds of your labor



be divided up afterward and what kind of life will that division allow you to have during the time you *aren't* forced by economic circumstance to sell to a boss?

These are all matters with great impact on individual workers and there's a clear sense in which the "class interest" of the working class in achieving better arrangements can be parsed as the aggregate of those individual workers' interests. But is that really what made Uncle Norman tick? Is it really what made Joe Hill tick?

Of course, workers in Prague when G.A. Cohen visited his aunt and uncle in 1964—four years before the Prague Spring—were disempowered in many parallel ways. This fact was certainly not lost on young Cohen, who was in the process of losing his childhood commitment to capital-C Communism and becoming an anti-Stalinist Marxist. But let's not tarry on that here. Assume for the sake of argument that Cold War-era Czechoslovakia was a workers' paradise and that Alternate Norman's efforts unambiguously served the interests of the individual working class.

Imagine Alternate Norman being given a chance to betray his comrades in the garment workers' union and/or the Canadian Communist Party in exchange for a massive bribe or promotion into a cushy management position. If he only cared about the interests of his class because it includes his own interests, why should he pass it up? He has non-economic interests in making Aunt Jennie and other people he cares about happy, of course, we can fiddle with the hypothetical again and give him an apolitical family (as many dedicated communists have had!) that would be happy to have him take the deal.

Given everything Cohen says about Uncle Norman, I tend to imagine that he would never in a million years take that deal. I'm certain that Joe Hill wouldn't have even taken such a deal in exchange for his life when he was framed and executed in Utah. Hill's songs are overflowing with what, if we're being real about this, can *only* be described as moral anger—at bosses, at scabs, and at the system. Anyone who's read up to Chapter 10 ("The Working Day") of Marx's masterpiece *Capital* knows that every paragraph is bursting with moral outrage at the way the processes of capital accumulation chew up and spit out human lives.

*Of course* classical Marxists are right that self-interest is a powerful motivator for liberatory political activity—one without which social change on that level is simply impossible. But the cruder iterations of that tradition miss the boat on the equally psychologically evident fact that there has never been, will never be, and *could* never be a successful mass movement for social change that wasn't driven by a powerful sense of *moral* complaint (however clearly or obscurely articulated). The sweet spot tends to be found where participants can see that their individual interests would be served by the construction of a better society and they see the way their interests are undermined by existing arrangements as not merely bad luck but *injustice*.

Human beings have a variety of motivations. Some of them are inevitably located in a dimension of human feeling that can only reasonably be described as moral. Whatever one thinks of meta-ethical issues about the nature of our moral feelings, we simply can't help having them and anyone interested in organizing people to achieve socialist goals would be ill-advised to pretend otherwise. It's not the only, and perhaps isn't the most important, element of socialist persuasion, but it is *an* element—on both the visceral level relevant to door-to-door organizers and the more abstract level relevant to the writings of philosophers—and we need to think about how the wheels of moral persuasion turn.

The effectiveness of Nietzsche's most powerful genealogical points against Christian morality derives from readers realizing the seemingly dishonorable motivations underlying their desire to punish sinners (in this life or otherwise). Immediately before he starts talking about Dante and Aquinas, we get a poetic interlude in which readers are invited into the "dark workshop" in which Christian values were made in the first place (Nietzsche 1967, p. 46). In so far as his project is to uproot and replace them, has he opened up a value-production workshop of his own?

On the reconstruction I've been offering—which is *not* being offered as an interpretation of everything Nietzsche takes himself to be up to, but as a way of understanding the parts that seem most compelling about the *Genealogy* quite independently of Nietzsche's self-understanding—Nietzsche isn't so much producing fresh values as *sculpting* a pre-existing value structure. His argument succeeds, if it does, by prodding along the

process of moral evolution, revealing values that may have been unarticulated but were already present in his readers and asking them to uproot weaker values in those unarticulated values' name.

No egalitarian can agree with all of Nietzsche's conclusions. But egalitarians who take normative persuasion seriously can profit from examining Nietzsche's tools.

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# Marx or Nietzsche? On Self-Actualization and Its Modern Discontents

Igor Shoikhedbrod

The aim of this chapter is to critically examine Karl Marx's and Friedrich Nietzsche's competing critiques of modernity as they pertain to the issue of self-actualization. I begin by defining self-actualization as the capacity of human beings to freely develop and express their creative powers socially and historically. I then compare Marx's conception of self-actualization as creative self-expression through objectified labour with Nietzsche's conception of self-actualization as life-affirming will to power and self-becoming, demonstrating in each case how modernity presents barriers as well as opportunities for self-actualization. I argue that the dichotomy between individual and social actualization reveals

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unbridgeable gaps between Marx and Nietzsche and also helps clarify the political stakes of self-actualization today, leaving readers with an unavoidable choice: Marx *or* Nietzsche? The author ultimately sides with Marx against Nietzsche.

For the purpose of the present chapter, self-actualization will be understood as the capacity of human beings to freely develop and realize their creative potentials within a given social and historical context. A wide range of scholars situate Marx in the perfectionist and expressivist philosophical traditions. For instance, Sean Sayers, a leading Hegelian-Marxist scholar, argues that for Marx ‘the criterion of historical development is the growth of human capacities and powers, the actualization of human potentialities: self-development and self-realization.’<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hurka offers a similar interpretation but situates Marx squarely in the perfectionist tradition.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, for his part, is often placed in the perfectionist and virtue ethics traditions. Nietzsche’s theorization of human greatness, which is best understood as the greatness of a minority of strong-willed spirits, has sparked a debate between proponents of virtue ethics and moral perfectionists. Brian Leiter maintains that ‘the two leading candidates are that Nietzsche embraces a kind of *virtue ethics* and that he is a kind of perfectionist’. These accounts turn out to overlap—the *perfections* of the latter account are often the *virtues* of the former.<sup>3</sup> Leiter is correct to note that the rival interpretations of Nietzsche overlap and highlight Nietzsche’s underlying concern with the actualization of genuine human excellence. I will begin by examining Karl Marx’s conceptualization of self-actualization as creative self-expression through objectified labour before turning to Nietzsche’s account of self-actualization as life-affirming will to power and self-becoming.

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 1998), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 177.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Leiter, ‘Nietzsche’s Moral and Political Philosophy’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/>.

## Marx on Modern Self-Actualization and Its Discontents

For Marx, labour is the universal way that human beings express themselves in the world as free beings. Labour enables human beings to create and transform their material reality by abstracting and objectifying their wills in practice. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes that 'man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity ... conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity...Only because of that is he a species being.'<sup>4</sup> Like other animals, human beings must secure their immediate material existence by labouring, but unlike other animals, human beings also produce a surplus of goods that extends beyond the limits of mere survival or necessity. Marx proceeds to identify the unique interchange that takes place between human beings and nature. By labouring, human beings transform the natural world into objects of their will and subsequently recognize themselves as free beings. Marx writes: 'the product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object; it is the *objectification* of labour. The realisation of labour is its objectification.'<sup>5</sup> In another context, Marx writes that 'the object of labour is therefore the *objectification of the species-life of man*: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created.'<sup>6</sup> Labour enables human beings to advance materially and intellectually such that they can consciously create and transform their own circumstances. Marx's account continues well into his later writings, where labour is regarded as the universal mode of human expression. In *Capital*, Marx writes:

We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,' *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 328.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 329.

puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality...He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, there is a definite sense in which Marx retains his earlier conception of 'species being' in later work, although the term is increasingly subsumed under the umbrella of labour power and productive forces, which now encompass the historical agents of production, natural resources, and machinery.

While Marx views labour as the quintessential form of self-actualization, he argues that the creative capacities of human beings are alienated under the modern capitalist mode of production. For Marx, private control over the means of production and the generalized commodification of labour power result in the alienation of workers from the products of their labour, from the work process, from one another, and from their species being. Such alienation has the consequence of reversing the process of self-actualization so that labour becomes a characteristically hostile process. Thus, instead of being a mode of self-affirmation, alienated labour becomes a mere means of ensuring the worker's animal existence. Marx writes that 'labour, *life activity, productive life* itself appears to man only as a *means* for the satisfaction of a need, the need to preserve physical existence ... Life itself appears only as a *means of life*.'<sup>8</sup> The most revealing point for our interpretive purposes is the dialectical reversal that results from the phenomenon of alienated labour. If species being is meant to capture the universal human capacity to create and transform material reality through labour, then capitalism deprives human beings of their capacities for self-actualization. Hence, Marx suggests that 'in tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his *species-life*.'<sup>9</sup> It follows for Marx that self-actualization is undermined by alienated

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', 328.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 329.

labour, which reverses the process of self-actualization and makes wage labour a mere means of ensuring the worker's animal existence.

Like his formative account of labour, the concept of alienation is also retained in Marx's later work. In *Capital*, Marx follows Aristotle in distinguishing between use and exchange, extending this distinction to the dual character of labour under capitalist production. One of the peculiar features of capitalism is the fact that labour power assumes the commodified form of wage labour. In societies where labour is commodified, labour's abstract and quantitative measure eclipses its otherwise qualitative and concrete character. This phenomenon mirrors the dialectical reversal alluded to earlier, namely, the reduction of labour power to physical necessity and compulsion. Marx describes this historically specific phenomenon in *Capital* as the 'fetishism of commodities':

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour because the relation of producers to the sum total of their labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour ... There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things...This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, Marx regards the capitalist mode of production as a dialectical advance over feudalism since it allows for a greater realization of human freedom and potential. However, Marx is equally cognisant that the growth of productive forces, which was unleashed by the Industrial Revolution, contains its opposite. Rather than being a genuine source of self-actualization, capitalist modernity stifles and denies human beings their creative capacities for self-expression. In addition, the capitalist mode of production is inherently wrought with contradictions. On the one hand, capitalism creates tremendous growth in industrial

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol 1*, 72.



output, but the wealth that is procured also results in the impoverishment of the workers who produce this wealth. Capitalism also generates cyclical economic crises, in part because while the working class produces a surplus wealth, it is not rich enough to consume this very wealth. These contradictions of capitalist modernity are eloquently described by Marx in his 'Speech on the Anniversary of the People's Paper,' where he observes:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same place that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All of our invention and progress seems to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. The antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand; this antagonism between productive powers, and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted.<sup>11</sup>

While capitalist modernity is characterized by these contradictory developments, Marx theorized that these contradictions would simultaneously give rise to a disciplined working-class movement with the revolutionary political will to usher social ownership of the means of production under communism. In this way, communism would restore labour as the universal mode of self-actualization, such that it becomes 'not only a means of life but life's prime want.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Marx, 'Speech on the Anniversary of the People's Paper,' *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 368–369.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx 'Critique of the Gotha Programme,' *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 615.

## Nietzsche on Modern Self-Actualization and Its Discontents

For Friedrich Nietzsche creative self-expression begins with the body and individual psychology. As Nietzsche puts it: ‘body am I and entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body.’ Nietzsche adds: ‘Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage—whose name is self. In your body he dwells he is your body.’<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche’s philosophy is centred on the concept of the will to power, which is closely connected to the body and the natural drive for creative power. Nietzsche understands human life as the expression of the will to power, which can be understood as the individual’s vast repertoire of passions, valuations, and continual process of overcoming. Nietzsche’s definition of power (*Macht* in German) should not be confused with mere brute force (*Kraft* in German). Nietzsche reiterates that human beings express their will to power externally through art, philosophy, morality, and politics. Robert Solomon, following Charles Taylor and other commentators, has situated Nietzsche in the Expressivist philosophical tradition, which includes thinkers such as Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Marx. Solomon explains that ‘the Expressivists believed that it was human nature (and possibly nature itself) to have the need to express itself by shaping its world in ways that reflected its inner nature.’<sup>14</sup> The philosopher’s ‘will to truth’ can be interpreted as another, albeit ‘higher’, expression of the will to power. Nietzsche affirms: ‘That is your whole will, you who are wisest: a will to power—when you speak of good and evil too, and of valuations. You still want to create the world before which you can kneel: that is your ultimate hope and intoxication.’<sup>15</sup> In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche defines the will to power as the ‘the unexhausted procreative will of life.’<sup>16</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues that ‘a living thing seeks

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kauffman (London: Viking Penguin, 1966), 34.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 160.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 114.

above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is will to power.’<sup>17</sup> There is a sense in which the outward projection of the will to power resonates with Marx’s Hegelian notion of objectification, but unlike Marx, Nietzsche is not concerned with the transformative aspect of human labour, which he would doubtless cast as ‘slavish.’ Nietzsche’s fundamental interest lies in the psychological ordering and expression of creative powers. Consequently, Nietzsche submits that ‘*one thing is needful*.—To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the idea.’<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power is also informed by the ancient Greek doctrine of *moira*, or fateful destiny, where fate determines the scope of one’s capacity for greatness. The individual’s task is therefore to actualize their naturally endowed talents and potentials. Nietzsche famously writes: ‘What does your conscience say?’—‘You shall become the person you are.’<sup>19</sup> Self-becoming is an integral component of Nietzsche’s philosophy because it emphasizes the creative growth and realization of human potential, and thus the historical expansion of the will to power. Nietzsche encourages his select ‘philosophers of the future’ to live life as if it were a masterpiece, in which one must continuously strive for perfection. Not surprisingly, Nietzsche is convinced that ‘nature’ provides the ultimate yardstick for greatness.

Although Nietzsche often exalts the body, impulse, and Dionysian passion, he also distinguishes human beings from animals on the grounds that human beings have history and consciously give meaning to their lives. Nietzsche writes that ‘the animal lives *unhistorically*, for it disappears entirely into the present, like a number that leaves no remainder...The human being, by contrast, braces himself against the great

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), #13, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Gay Science,’ in *The Nietzsche Reader*, Keith Pearson and Duncan Large, eds (Malden Blackwell, 2006), #290, 220.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, #270, 126.

and ever-greater burden of the past.’<sup>20</sup> The historical track record reveals humanity’s process of overcoming and its prevailing system of values. Nietzsche surmises that ‘a tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power.’<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, Nietzsche explicitly distinguishes between values that he deems ‘healthy’ and ‘life-affirming’ and those that are ‘decadent’ and ‘life-denying.’ In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche traces master morality to the ancient nobility that was powerful enough to impose their values (i.e., notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’). While master morality is active and life-affirming, slave morality is reactive and life-denying, driven by the sheer *ressentiment* of the weak against the strong. Nietzsche argues that the *pathos of distance* originally separated the strong-willed nobles from the slaves. The masters were powerful enough to impose their values on the slaves, who were forced to submit to the will of the strong. However, master morality was eventually overturned by slave morality through a process of spiritual revenge that saw the inversion of ‘good’ into ‘evil’ and ‘bad’ into ‘good,’ marking the world-historical victory of slave morality over master morality. Nietzsche explains that slave morality, which was inaugurated by Judaism, ultimately got the upper hand. Christianity continued the Judean project by further perpetuating ascetic and life-denying practices globally. Far from expressing a life-affirming will to power, slave morality is, for Nietzsche, the morality of the herd, which renounces the greatness of strong-willed spirits and preaches ‘bad conscience’.

The modern advent of democracy is regarded by Nietzsche as a secularized version of Christianity, which is plagued by the same disease. Nietzsche surmises that ‘the *democratic* movement is the heir of the Christian movement.’<sup>22</sup> Democracy secularizes the Christian values of loving one’s neighbour and pitying the poor with universal suffrage and equality rights for all. However, Nietzsche is quick to point out that democracy assumes, rather erroneously, that everyone is equal,

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<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,’ in *The Nietzsche Reader*, #1, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #202, 116.

while heaping scorn on those who strive to transcend the herd instinct. Nietzsche posits that ‘moral judgements and condemnations constitute the favourite form of revenge of the spiritually limited against those less limited—also a sort of compensation for having been ill-favored by nature.’<sup>23</sup> The spiritual revenge becomes the secularized democratic revenge of the weak, whereby all of the characteristics that were hitherto life-affirming are now renounced and deemed ‘unjust,’ ‘immoral,’ and ‘evil.’

While ascetic ideals previously introduced depth into human life, Nietzsche remains adamant that these ideals cannot help but produce nihilism, particularly with the death of God and the loss of meaning (and of horizons) that it brings about. Judging from Nietzsche’s famous ‘parable of the madman,’ modern secularization signals both a crisis of the highest magnitude and an opportunity for the transvaluation of all existing values. Nietzsche is worried that the death of God creates an imminent void, which fosters emptiness and nihilism. However, this very crisis of meaning also provides an opening for the birth of new values.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, Nietzsche is convinced that Christianity no longer gives meaning to human existence and fosters nihilism, decadence, and mediocrity. The democratization of Europe exacerbates this ‘illness’ because it replicates life-denying practices on a mass scale and renounces uniqueness, creativity, and—in a word—the self-actualization of strong-willed spirits. Nietzsche writes: ‘For this is how things are: the diminution and levelling of European man constitutes *our* greatest danger, for the site of him makes us weary.—We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater.’<sup>25</sup> Viewed from this prism, democratic modernity stands as a major barrier to self-actualization. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche cautions that modernity is stuck between the ‘last man’ and the ‘over man,’ that is, between moral decay and the birth of new values. Nietzsche regards the last man as the self-satisfied and complacent bourgeois individual, who has made equality, material comfort, and consumption

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, #219, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, ‘The Gay Science’ in *The Nietzsche Reader*, #125, 224.

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, I, #12, 44.

the end and be all.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, far from actualizing their creative powers and affirming life, the last men are satisfied with their mediocrity and reproduce the cycle of decadence. Nietzsche writes: 'No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a mad house.'<sup>27</sup> As was previously noted, while Nietzsche criticizes democratic modernity for its renunciation of life, he also views the modern crisis of meaning as an historical opportunity. The decline of Christianity fosters nihilism, but it simultaneously opens the door for the creation of new values. Looking forward, Nietzsche declares that 'morality will gradually *perish* now: this is the greatest spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe—the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles.'<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the last men, Nietzsche thinks that the overmen will struggle to overcome and ultimately triumph over life-denying values. For this reason, Nietzsche encourages his future philosophers to do away with decadent values. He writes that 'what is falling, we should still push. Everything today falls and decays: who should check it? But I—I even want to push it.'<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, Nietzsche encourages his future philosophers to give birth to new, 'noble' values. Since Nietzsche thinks that modern democracy is decadent and life-denying, he offers in its place a 'philosophy of the future,' which proclaims self-overcoming and the revaluation of all existing values. Nietzsche writes:

We have a different faith; to us the democratic movement is not only a form of the decay of political organization but a form of the decay, namely the diminution of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value. Where, then, must *we* reach with our hopes? Towards *new philosophers*, there is no choice; towards spirits strong and original enough to provide the stimuli for opposite valuations and to revalue and invert 'eternal values.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, III, #27, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 126.

Nietzsche ultimately espouses a life-affirming philosophy, which champions the outward projection of one's will to power, that is, by saying yes to life as opposed to embracing the herd instinct, which glorifies weakness and self-renunciation. Naturally, Nietzsche thinks that such a task is reserved for a minority of strong-willed individuals. These so-called 'philosophers of the future' will live beyond the moralizing confines of good and evil. In becoming masters again, these future philosophers would effectively 'become who they are.' This informs Nietzsche's broader project of critiquing all hitherto existing values and his future-oriented call for a new master morality.

## **An Unbridgeable Gap: Marx Contra Nietzsche and Nietzsche Contra Marx**

Having examined Marx's and Nietzsche's conceptions of self-actualization, as well as their respective understandings of modern fetters to self-actualization, the time has come to closely compare these two mighty thinkers. Marx and Nietzsche concur that human beings create, expand, and transform their creative capacities socially and historically. As Nancy Love has observed in her influential comparative study of Marx and Nietzsche, 'both [Marx and Nietzsche] understand man as a natural historical being, as a being who creates himself historically through his relations to nature and society. Both also understand history as the expansion of his human activity, as the development of increased productive capacities or of a stronger will to power.'<sup>31</sup> Marx and Nietzsche demonstrate a concern for the actualization and perfection of creative human capacities. For Marx, labour remains the quintessential mode of self-actualization, whereby human beings create and transform their material and intellectual realities. For Nietzsche, human beings give meaning to their lives by projecting their will to power externally through their moral valuations, philosophies, politics, and artistic endeavours. Marx views the economic structure of society

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy Love, *Marx, Nietzsche, and Modernity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), 65.

as a key prism for grasping the historical nature of ideology and the potential for revolutionary social transformation, whereas Nietzsche views the will to power as the creative driving force of human life, history, and values.

Aside from their shared concern with self-actualization, Marx and Nietzsche identify modern barriers to self-actualization and suggest different paths for overcoming these barriers. For Marx, as we have seen, the modern forces of production are fettered by capitalist relations of production, which stultify self-actualization because of exploitative relations of production. Nevertheless, Marx remains adamant that the contradictions between wage labour and capital will be overcome in the communist mode of production, where labour will cease to be alienating and will instead become liberating and fulfilling. Not unlike Marx, Nietzsche also acknowledges that modernity offers tremendous potential, but he argues that this potential (i.e., the potential expansion of the will to power) is undermined by Christianity and democratic modernity, which perpetuate life-denying asceticism and renounce genuine human greatness. Nietzsche is adamant that this same process creates an opening for the birth of new values. In her careful comparative analysis of Marx and Nietzsche, Nancy Love affirms:

Marx describes modern man as alienated: Nietzsche describes him as sick. According to Marx, although man's productive capacity expands tremendously in capitalist society, potentially allowing men to meet their needs and to produce freely and universally, they are alienated from human production. According to Nietzsche, although man is stronger than pre-man, his conscious creations in modern society are ascetic ideals which undermine his instincts and deny life as will to power. Marx and Nietzsche agree that the means to overcome alienation and ascetic ideals exist in modern society. Their metaphors for this coincide: Nietzsche speaks of man's sickness as an illness in the sense that *pregnancy* is an illness; Marx describes contradictions which will give *birth* to the revolutionary proletariat.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



However, any potential areas of convergence between Marx and Nietzsche are far outweighed by their philosophical and, above all, political differences. Marx and Nietzsche disagree fundamentally about the value of democracy, formal equality, as well as the background preconditions for ‘human greatness.’ While Marx is convinced that the capitalist mode of production stultifies human potential because of its economically oppressive relations of production, Nietzsche is adamant that the ascetic ideals undergirding democratic modernity constitute the greatest obstacle to the self-actualization of strong-willed spirits. At any rate, Love argues convincingly that Marx would criticize Nietzsche for his reactionary bourgeois individualism because the latter’s uncritical faith in the *pathos of distance* and future philosophers demonstrate his political inability to imagine social arrangements without class oppression. Nietzsche, for his part, would criticize Marx’s communism as the perfection of the ‘last man.’<sup>33</sup> Love’s incompatibility thesis continues to raise serious challenges to ongoing attempts at synthesizing Marx and Nietzsche in the twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup>

While Walter Kauffman and Robert Solomon have variously argued that Nietzsche lacks an overarching political philosophy because he was opposed to ‘system building,’ offering instead a moral philosophy for individual cultivation, one cannot sidestep the unavoidable political implications of Nietzsche’s teachings. As Domenico Losurdo has shown convincingly in his detailed intellectual ‘balance sheet,’ Nietzsche’s philosophical teachings are consistently informed by the politics of aristocratic radicalism.<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche’s radically anti-egalitarian outlook is deeply rooted and therefore inescapable. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche makes it clear that “men are not equal”. Nor shall they become equal! What would my love of the overman be if I spoke otherwise?<sup>36</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche explains that suffering and oppression are preconditions for the expansion of the will to power and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 192–194.

<sup>34</sup> See Jonas Ceika, *How to Philosophize with a Hammer and Sickle: Nietzsche and Marx for the Twenty-First Century* (Repeater, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton. (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 101.

self-overcoming. Nietzsche submits that ‘his power of invention and stimulation (his “spirit”) had to develop under prolonged pressure and constraint into refinement and audacity, his life-will had to be enhanced into an unconditional power-will. We think that hardness, forcefulness, slavery, danger in the alley and the heart... the art of experiment and devilry of every kind, that everything evil, terrible, tyrannical, in man, everything in him that is kin to beasts of prey and serpents, serves the enhancement of the species “man” as much as its opposite does.’<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche also disparages the futuristic socialist ideal of irradiating class inequalities. Socialism, for Nietzsche, creates the perfect herd animal as it marks the complete diminution of the individual. Nietzsche observes that ‘the *collective degeneration of man* down to what today appears to the socialist dolts and blockheads as their “man of the future”—as their ideal—this degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal (or, as they say, to the man of the “free society”), this animalization of man into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims, is *possible*, there is no doubt of it.’<sup>38</sup> In this light, it makes sense that Nietzsche’s solution to the problem of modern nihilism is the elevation of a minority of strong-willed spirits.

Marx, for his part, would criticize the Nietzschean notion that only ‘great men’ make history, a notion Marx thinks is fundamentally abstracted from the economic foundation that gives rise to social and political phenomena. As Irving Zeitlin has shown in his re-examination of Nietzsche, Marx and Nietzsche can be placed in a critical dialogue by taking stock of how Marx and Engels responded to the proto-Nietzschean philosopher Max Stirner.<sup>39</sup> Marx and Engels submit:

If Sancho [Stirner] had only understood the fact that within the frameworks of definite modes of production, which, of course, are not dependent on the will, alien practical forces, which are independent not only of isolated individuals but even of all of them together, always come to stand above the people—then he could be fairly indifferent as to

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<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #44, 54–55.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., #203, 118.

<sup>39</sup> Irving Zeitlin, *Nietzsche: A Re-Examination* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 113–125.

whether this fact is presented in a religious form or distorted in the imagination of the egoist, for whom everything occurs in the imagination, in such a way that he puts nothing above himself...what seems to him a product of thought he would have understood to be a product of life.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere in the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels respond to the proto-Nietzschean charge that socialism, or communism in Marx's case, creates the perfect herd animal because it abolishes individuality and preaches collective altruism and self-sacrifice. Once again, Marx and Engels emphasize that the economic structure gives rise to a particular system of values:

Communism is simply incomprehensible to our saint because the communists do not put egoism against self-sacrifice or self-sacrifice against egoism, nor do they express this contradiction theoretically either in its sentimental or in its high flown ideological form; on the contrary, they demonstrate the material basis engendering it, with which it disappears of itself. The communists do not preach morality at all, such as Stirner preaches so extensively. They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as self-sacrifice, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals. Hence, the communist by no means want...to do away with the 'private individual' for the sake of the 'general,' self-sacrificing man.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most pertinently, Marx's conceptualization of human potential and self-actualization is not restricted to a minority of strong-willed spirits. In their discussion of artistic talent under communism, Marx and Engels maintain that 'it was not their view [the view of communists], as Sancho [Stirner] imagines, that each should do the work of Raphael, but that anyone in whom here is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance. Sancho imagines that Raphael produced his pictures independently of the division of labour that existed in Rome at the time...whether an individual like Raphael

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<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology,' in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

succeeds in developing his talent depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it.<sup>42</sup> Hence, Marx and Engels reiterate that the actualization of human talents depends in large part on the prevailing mode of production. Capitalism, because of its exploitative relations of production and class antagonisms, remains a fetter to creative self-expression and self-actualization. In contrast, communism validates the actualization of creative human potential because it overcomes alienation, exploitative relations of production, and class antagonisms. This leads to Marx's and Engels' famous assertion in the *Communist Manifesto* that 'in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.'<sup>43</sup> Unlike Nietzsche, the free development of each, for Marx, does not come at the expense of the free development of all.

Nietzsche's philosophy, as we have seen, is based on a fundamental division between master morality and slave morality, between the overman and the last man, and between self-overcoming and decay. Similarly, Nietzsche's insistence that human beings are naturally unequal and cannot be equal is as old as ancient Greek philosophy. The notion of a naturally ordered universe and its resultant inequalities of rank and order were commonplace in ancient philosophy and are expressed in the works of its greatest representatives, Plato and Aristotle. However, such naturalistic assumptions have largely been discredited with political practice and revolutionary social transformation. In this sense, it is erroneous for Nietzsche to assume that slavery in one form or another is necessary for the cultivation of 'great individuals'. To be sure, some will always possess more talents and skills than others, but if one genuinely aspires to actualize creative capacities or, for that matter, give birth to life-affirming values, then the point is to broaden the range of opportunities for individuals to 'become who they are.' Indeed, as Marx and Engels point out, 'anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The Communist Manifesto,' in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 262.

without hindrance.’<sup>44</sup> Whereas justifications for natural hierarchies were commonplace among the ancients given that their material existence was largely predicated on the institution of slavery and forced labour, there is little reason to think that class inequalities are necessary for the cultivation of ‘great individuals’. If anything, such inequalities act as fetters to self-actualization.

While Nietzsche was relentless in his critique of modern philosophers and social movements, he had great confidence in the philosophers of the future who would philosophize with a hammer and give birth to new values. However, the problem is that Nietzsche’s future philosophers cannot give birth to life-affirming values by seeking solitude from the marketplace, nor can they actualize life-affirming values without a simultaneous change in the background social, economic, and political conditions that would be conducive to the birth of new values. Nietzsche’s critique of modernity assumes that the life-denying ideals of democracy are the fundamental barriers to self-actualization. However, it is precisely the lack of, or insufficient realization of democracy, that continues to act as a fundamental barrier to self-actualization in contemporary societies. At a very basic level, human beings require background material preconditions (security of wellbeing, employment, and economic stability more generally) to advance physically and intellectually. Thus, to actualize their creative potentials, human beings need to have greater control over their material conditions of life. One of the enduring problems of capitalist modernity, as Marx points out, is that our material conditions of life are inherently precarious while the experience of labouring is largely alienating and hostile, which diminishes the creative aspects of human life.

To be fair, Nietzsche was also critical of capitalist production because he thought that ascetic industriousness and consumption were beginning to undermine creative expression, leisure, and the affirmation of life. However, Nietzsche’s passing solution to the problem of alienated labour was to confine the alienating category of labour strictly to industrial workers while extending creative work to artists, musicians, and philosophers. Nietzsche writes: ‘We protect artists and poets and those who are

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology’, 205.

masters in anything, but as natures that *are* of a higher kind than these, who have the ability to do something, merely “productive men”, we do not confound ourselves with them.<sup>45</sup> Love provides a fruitful commentary on the role of labour, creative expression, and the implications of capitalist exchange for Marx and Nietzsche, respectively:

Marx and Nietzsche criticize capitalist production for commodity exchange because it makes man’s self-creation his self-denial. However, Marx criticizes production for commodity exchange because labor, man’s life activity, becomes an alienating activity. Nietzsche’s concern is that labor, the herd’s psychological exchange, becomes ubiquitous. Where Marx argues that labor must be freed from capitalist economic interests, Nietzsche maintains that the will to power must be freed from labor, for it is an ascetic herd interest.<sup>46</sup>

If one were to boil down the main source of the unbridgeable gap between Marx and Nietzsche with respect to self-actualization, it would lie in their opposing attitudes towards the legacy left behind by Hegel. Like Hegel and Kant before him, Marx embraces the modern recognition of personhood and formal rights as necessary preconditions for further inroads in emancipation. Nietzsche’s adherence to a rigid hierarchy of rank and order leads him to condemn the French Revolution and its subsequent reverberations, all of which are interpreted as manifestations of slave morality. Whereas Marx criticized liberal democracy on the grounds that there is an overwhelming discrepancy between the formal equality that is invoked by the modern *Rechtsstaat* (i.e., universal suffrage and equality before the law) and the realities of civil society (exploitative production and class domination), Nietzsche regarded liberal democracy as a fateful steppingstone to the overall degeneration of human beings under socialism.

In the end, there can be no meaningful synthesis of Marx *and* Nietzsche; there can only be a choice between Marx *or* Nietzsche. The two thinkers differed profoundly in how they understood modern self-actualization and its discontents. In other words, those who value and

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<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche cited in Nancy Love’s *Marx, Nietzsche, and Modernity*, 171.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

continue to champion self-actualization today must choose between Marx and Nietzsche. Despite his powerful diagnosis of modernity, Nietzsche remained an anti-modern modernist, who sought to restore master morality on a new footing, whereas Marx sought to extend self-actualization beyond its stultified confines under capitalist production. Nietzsche could not imagine a world without masters and slaves, whereas Marx remained adamant that the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. The choice for contemporaries could not be clearer.

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# **Nietzsche's Critique of Modernity**



# Nietzsche on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Edward Andrew

## Introduction

The French Revolution was an event of particular interest to political philosophers. For Hegel, it was the event that put an end to the age-old Platonic division between guardians and producers. The master–slave conflict culminated in the bourgeois epoch where everyone works and everyone fights. The equality of persons is consistent with a Hegelian rank ordering of activities, with art, religion and philosophy possessing an authority that supersedes that of nation-states. Marx thought that, although the French Revolution was a great step forward, the conflict between rulers and producers awaits resolution in the future, in a society of self-managing producers or “self-government of the immediate producers.” Nietzsche, on the other hand, thought the French Revolution to be a major disaster that eliminated the hierarchy of the *ancien*

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*régime*, bringing about a leveling of culture, a mixing of high culture and popular culture into mass culture and a degradation of leisure into relaxation and entertainment.

Nietzsche called for a rank ordering of persons that he thought essential for a rank ordering of activities, a return of servitude for producers and *otium et bellum* for those of noble spirit. In *Human, All Too Human*, # 439, Nietzsche wrote: "A higher culture can only originate where there are two distinct castes of society: that of the working class, and that of the leisure class who are capable of true leisure...." In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, #1.17, Nietzsche wrote that the fundamental task of philosophers of the future will be "the determination of the *order of rank among values*" and "degrees of rank among individuals" (Preface.3). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, # 257, Nietzsche declared: "Every enhancement of the type 'man' has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and difference in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other." He continued in #258 as follows: "The essential characteristic of a good and healthy aristocracy ... is that it ... accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments." In *The Will To Power*, # 592, Nietzsche asserted that the chief philosophic "problem is the *order of rank of different kinds of life*." "The great majority of men have no right to existence, but are a misfortune to higher men" (*Will to Power*, # 872). "We new philosophers, however, not only do we start by describing the actual order of rank and differences in the value of men, we also desire precisely the opposite of an assimilation, an equalization" (*Will to Power*, # 988). The superhuman masters of the earth are "not merely a master race whose sole task is to rule, but a race with its own sphere of life, with an excess of strength for beauty, bravery, culture, manners to the highest peak of the spirit" (*Will to Power*, # 898).

## Interpretations of Nietzsche on Enlightenment

Nietzsche's political philosophy has recently come under rigorously critical scrutiny by two able scholars. In his short, readable book, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, Ronald Beiner make the bold claim that "the *whole* of Nietzsche's philosophy is subordinate to, or in the service of, his politics."<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's politics were fascistic and became an ideological weapon of Nazism in 1930s Germany and currently of the right-wing populist parties around the world. The recent translation of Domenico Losurdo's long, scholarly *Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico* (2002) provides substantial evidence to support Beiner's claim that Nietzsche's philosophy serves a proto-fascist politics.<sup>2</sup> Central to both Beiner's and Losurdo's views are Nietzsche unchanging view of the French Revolution as a disaster and his changing views on the Enlightenment from his early anti-enlightenment views in *The Birth of Tragedy* through his pro-Enlightenment *Human, All-too-Human* to his anti-Enlightenment *Beyond Good and Evil*. Harrison Fluss summarizes Losurdo's view of *Human, All-too-Human*: "The true Enlightenment of the French moralists and Voltaire was pitted against the proto-socialism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau." Further, "Nietzsche sought to rescue the French Enlightenment from the clutches of the modern disease of universalizing and leveling progressivism, and of turning a critical (and scientific) eye of suspicion towards every doctrine." Then after his break with Paul Rée and Lou Salomé, "Nietzsche cast off the positivistic and naturalistic appeals to science and Enlightenment."<sup>3</sup> This chapter will question Nietzsche's, Beiner's and Losurdo's interpretations of the relationship between the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Italics are Beiner's. *Dangerous Minds* condenses arguments in his longer scholarly treatise *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton, introduction by Harrison Fluss, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Fluss, introduction, pp. 7–8.

Losurdo writes that “the Enlightenment is well known” as “the philosophy that ideologically prepared the collapse of the *ancien régime*” (45). Modernity, Nietzsche thought, “found its most ruinous manifestation in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution” (87) and so railed against “the arrogance of reason of the Enlightenment and revolution” (93). Optimistic visions of social progress derived from the “doctrines of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution” (249). I wish to challenge Nietzsche’s and Losurdo’s of the conjunction of Enlightenment and revolution. Historians have not designated an ideological source for the dress rehearsal of the French Revolution, the Fronde (1648–53), a series of bloody battles against state centralization during the minority of Louis XIV, led by the French nobility but taken up vigorously by plebeians, as later happened during the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> However, Losurdo insists that “the Enlightenment mocked the *ancien régime*” (465), undermined the prejudices and customs that supported the *ancien régime* (840, 870, 873) but made an exception for Voltaire who hated Rousseau and his egalitarianism, despised the *canaille*, and, like Nietzsche himself, was an anti-revolutionary “*grandseigneur* of the spirit.”<sup>5</sup> Losurdo writes that Nietzsche made “a clear distinction between Voltaire on the one hand and Rousseau and the actual Enlightenment on the other” (256). Beiner agrees (*Civil Religion*, 390): “As long as Nietzsche could conceive of the Enlightenment as aristocratic (centered on the figure of Voltaire), he could and did embrace it. As soon as Nietzsche’s conception of the Enlightenment more towards the democratizing influence of Rousseau, he was obliged to reject it.”<sup>6</sup> Since Diderot, D’Alembert, Mably and Hume were on Voltaire’s side against Rousseau, Beiner and Losurdo are misleading in linking Rousseau to the mainstream of Enlighteners. Hume noted that “the *philosophes* rejected Rousseau because he was seen

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<sup>4</sup> A dress rehearsal in Roman garb with lower-class members of L’Ormée giving the populist cry in Latin “*vox populi, vox dei*” set a precedent for the Roman dress in the drama of the French Revolution. See Edward Andrew, *Imperial Republics: Revolution, War, and Territorial Expansion from the English Civil War to the French Revolution* (University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 106–115.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1969), 283.

<sup>6</sup> Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 390.

to be ‘overbound’ to religion.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, only Adam Smith among the Enlighteners was favorably disposed to Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*. Thus, Losurdo is misleading when he asserts that “the actual Enlightenment” was egalitarian and revolutionary.<sup>8</sup>

Rousseau has been interpreted as more of a counter-Enlightenment than an Enlightenment thinker,<sup>9</sup> and in this and following sections, I shall provide reasons why Rousseau was an outsider to the Enlightenment. Nietzsche however thought Rousseau a central figure in the Enlightenment and was also the intellectual source of the French Revolution. Keith Ansell-Pearson wrote: “The extent to which Nietzsche is an astute or serious reader of Rousseau is debatable.” Perhaps, arising from Nietzsche’s superficial reading of Rousseau, Ansell-Pearson concludes that Nietzsche erred in conceiving “the Enlightenment as the cause of the Revolution” and, in his middle writings, construed “the French Revolution as a counter-enlightenment development.”<sup>10</sup>

In *Human, All Too Human*, dedicated to Voltaire, Nietzsche wrote (#463): “It was not Voltaire’s moderate nature, inclined towards regulating, purifying and reconstructing but Rousseau’s passionate follies and half-lies that aroused the optimistic spirit of the Revolution.” It was Rousseau that brought fanaticism to enlightenment, which “is essentially foreign to that phenomenon, and left to itself, would have passed silently through the clouds like a shaft of light, long content to transfigure individuals alone, and thus only slowly transfiguring national customs and institutions as well. But now, bound hand and foot to a violent and abrupt monster, enlightenment itself became violent and abrupt. Its danger has therefore become almost greater than its useful quality of

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<sup>7</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche on Enlightenment and Fanaticism: On the middle writings,” in Paul Katsafanas ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Losurdo (103–104) cites Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* asserting that human differences are the effect, not the cause, of the division of labor. Losurdo’s Marxism is basically an elaboration of this point, with particular emphasis on the division between mental and physical labor, or labor and management.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the eighteenth-century to the present* (London: Routledge, 2006), Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche on the Enlightenment and Fanaticism”, 13–16.

liberation and illumination ..." (pt. 2, #221). Weighing the balance of the use and abuse of enlightenment, of the good aristocratic Voltairean Enlightenment and the bad democratic Rousseauian "Enlightenment," we can see that Ansell-Pearson overstated his view that Nietzsche's middle period interpreted "the French Revolution as a counter-enlightenment development."

The secularism of the French Revolution, according to Losurdo, was attributable to the anti-Catholicism of the Enlightenment. Losurdo does not consider whether the conflicts *within* the Catholic Church, between Jansenists and Jesuits, and between Gallicans whose authority was French bishops and Jesuits whose allegiance was to Rome, might have weakened the authority of the Church as much as the challenges from *without*, by the *philosophes*.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Gay Science* #358, Nietzsche wrote: "A church is above all a structure for ruling that secures the highest rank for the *more spiritual* human beings and that *believes* in the power of *spirituality* to the extent of forbidding itself of all the cruder instruments of force; and on this score alone the church is under all circumstances a *nobler* institution than the state." In this respect, Nietzsche distanced himself from the mainstream of the Enlightenment which attacked altars more than thrones. In his later writings, Nietzsche came to see Catholicism to be a valuable buttress to hierarchy. However, in *The Anti-Christ* # 57, Nietzsche favored the Manu Law-Book to promote hierarchy: "The *order of castes*, the supreme, the dominating law, is only the sanctioning of a *natural order*, a natural law of the first rank over which no arbitrary caprice, no 'modern idea' has any power." Beiner emphasizes that Nietzsche longed for new gods to replace the ancient pagan gods for sociological not theological reasons. Nietzsche, Beiner holds, was a civil religion theorist for whom religion is not followed for its truth but is constructed for its hierarchical politics.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Dale Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); William Doyle, *Jansenism: Catholic Resistance to Authority from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Beiner, *Civil Religion*, chap. 30–31.

Losurdo situates Nietzsche's writings in relation to other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers but never situates the French Revolution within its historical context. He never mentions the fiscal crisis of the French state, brought about by the century of constant wars with Britain that followed the anti-Catholic Glorious Revolution in 1688, which the British could better finance because of their efficient (and regressive) taxation from excises on commodities of popular consumption.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the French beggared themselves by liberating the American colonies, the richest and least taxed part of the British Empire, from the English yoke, and when the crown convoked the Estates-General to pay down the war debt, the clergy and nobility refused the king's request to pay taxes, and then the nobility initiated the French Revolution by turning on the clergy to pay off the deficit. We political theorists are apt to attribute political events to political theories; for example, the American unwillingness to pay its share of the French and Indian War<sup>14</sup> has often been attributed to, and justified by, Locke and Montesquieu, and the French Revolution has been blamed on Rousseau, rather than the all-too-human unwillingness to pay taxes. Losurdo was by no means the first to attribute the French Revolution and Jacobinism to Rousseau. The belief that Rousseau was "so dear to the Jacobins," "Robespierre's teacher" (Losurdo, 250, 273, 290, 627, 918), the intellectual source of Jacobinism and the Terror, is by no means confined to Nietzsche and Losurdo. Although it is often assumed that the moderates during the French Revolution followed Locke and Montesquieu and the radicals followed Rousseau, Robespierre and the other Jacobin firebrands such as Marat, Saint-Just and Desmoulins, read and admired Montesquieu and Voltaire as much as they read and admired Rousseau.<sup>15</sup> Rousseau's clearest disciples in the French Revolution, despite the fact that his sexism approached that of Nietzsche's, were the feminists, Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft and Manon Pilipon, Mme

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<sup>13</sup> John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> The Seven Years War (1756–63) was known in America as the French and Indian War since the conflict defeated Catholic New France, and its aboriginal allies, in North America.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew, *Imperial Republics*, 140–141.



de Roland.<sup>16</sup> Losurdo (922) suggests the reason for this might be that *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (not the *Discourse on Inequality* or *The Social Contract*) were the most widely read of Rousseau's works at the time of the revolution. Nietzsche associated Rousseau with feminism, "the sovereignty of the senses" and the "rule of feeling." He wrote: "The French Revolution as the continuation of Christianity. Rousseau is the seducer: he again unfetters woman who is henceforth represented in an ever more interesting manner—as suffering."<sup>17</sup> Losurdo (918–20) thinks Rousseau was both the godfather of the patriarchal Jacobins and their feminist victims.

## Nietzsche and Voltaire

A curious feature of *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel* is Losurdo's attribution to the anti-Semitic Voltaire, rather than the philo-Semitic Rousseau, for Nietzsche's turn away from Wagnerian anti-Semitism towards Enlightenment toleration. Nietzsche was not a scholar and may not have read "les Juifs" in Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* but Losurdo is, and thus I find it odd that Voltaire's name is invoked for the turn away from Wagnerian anti-Semitism.<sup>18</sup> Voltaire led the way from the pre-modern anti-Semitism of hatred for the Christ-killers to the modern and Hitlerian anti-Semitism of hatred for the Christ-bringers, those who brought Christian morality into the world. Nietzsche wrote: "Christianity, growing from Jewish roots and comprehensible only as a product of this soil, represents the *reaction* against that morality of breeding, of race, of privilege—it is the *anti-Aryan* religion *par excellence*...."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> To be sure, Wollstonecraft criticized Rousseau's assertions about natural difference between the sexes but her statement, in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*—"Our own conscience is the most enlightened philosopher"—is pure Rousseau.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 58–59.

<sup>18</sup> Like Losurdo, Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments*, 75 asserts that admiration for Voltaire was "a key aspect of his rejection of Wagnerian romanticism."

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 58. Also *Antichrist*, # 43–44.

Losurdo does not criticize Voltaire for what he criticizes in Voltaire's Enlightenment colleagues; he (909) deprecates D'Alembert's letter to Frederick the Great offering "the anti-Catholic sentiments of the Enlightenment to justify the annexation of Polish territories, by presenting it as a contribution to the spread of Enlightenment and the defence of the cause of tolerance." Voltaire wrote exactly the same sentiments to both Frederick and Catherine the Great.<sup>20</sup> Rousseau objected to both the Prussian and Russian annexation of Polish territories. Voltaire also wrote to Catherine in 1768 praising her incursion into the Ottoman Empire: "Madam, your imperial Majesty restores me to life by killing Turks." Justifying his horrifyingly Nietzschean sentiments in an enlightened manner, Voltaire wrote: "Clearly, people who neglect the fine arts and who lock up women, deserve to be exterminated."<sup>21</sup> The servile toadying to a despot hardly deserves Nietzsche's praise as a "grand-seigneur of the spirit." If Losurdo and Beiner are right to link Nietzsche to Hitler, Voltaire deserves some of the credit.

## The French Enlightenment and Their British Predecessors

The progenitors of Enlightenment for Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert and Jefferson were Bacon, Newton and Locke. These three thinkers were the holy trinity of the Enlightenment because they were empiricists, as distinct from the rationalists Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant: the trinity thought all knowledge is acquired by sense experience, experiment and inductive reasoning; knowledge is not innate, or deduced from self-evident propositions. Empiricism was valued because it was not a closed system; open to new observations and experiments, empiricism corresponded to the idea of progressively encyclopedic knowledge.

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<sup>20</sup> See *Letters of Voltaire and Frederick the Great*, ed. Richard Aldington (London: Routledge, 1927); *Voltaire and Catherine the Great: Selected Correspondence*, trans. A. Lentin (Cambridge: Oriental Research Partners, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> *Voltaire and Catherine the Great: Selected Correspondence*, 52, 68.

Thus, when Beiner wishes to add Hobbes and Spinoza as Enlightenment thinkers, he is employing different criteria for inclusion than the eighteenth-century Enlightenment did.<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Israel's designation of Spinoza as the central figure in his questionable history of the "radical Enlightenment" also employs different grounds for inclusion in the Enlightenment than *lumières* did.<sup>23</sup> Losurdo's inclusion of Leibniz within the Enlightenment<sup>24</sup> is bizarre since Leibniz's thought was lampooned in Voltaire's *Candide*. It is quite possible to consider the seventeenth-century rationalists to be better philosophers than the eighteenth-century *lumières* but their deductive methods ran counter to the inductivism championed by L'*Encyclopédie*. The philosophic coherence or consistency of the great rationalist systems of the seventeenth century was also suspect; D'Alembert's and Diderot's had a manifest distaste for "l'esprit de système." Moreover, Israel's and Beiner's inclusion of Hobbes and Spinoza favors their views of a democratic enlightenment, which runs counter to the mainstream of the Enlightenment that divided society into a vanguard of enlightened educators and the vast majority in need of enlightenment. In his entry "*Encyclopédie*" in his *Encyclopédie*, Diderot wrote that "the general mass of men are not so made that they can either promote or understand this forward March of the human spirit."

In his *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, D'Alembert wrote that he would have liked to include his compatriot Descartes with the English triumvirate but he has to be excluded as an Enlightener because of his outdated notion of innate ideas. On those grounds, Rousseau has to be excluded from the French Enlightenment. Rousseau concluded his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* with uplifting rhetoric for "common men" or "simple souls" that the principles of virtue are "engraved in all hearts" so that it suffices "to listen to the voice of one's

<sup>22</sup> Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 104, 110, 120, 363, 411, 419.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (2001) considers Spinoza the progenitor of the radical enlightenment. His questionable premise is that religious radicalism (atheism) breeds political radicalism, while religious moderation (deism) limits political radicalism. Israel's Spinozan Henri de Boullainvilliers is grouped with Gobineau and Nietzsche as master race theorists and aristocratic reactionaries by Losurdo, *Nietzsche*, 411–415, 786–787.

<sup>24</sup> Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2011), 313.

conscience.” This doctrine is elaborated in the Savoyard vicar’s paean to conscience “as an innate principle of justice and virtue.”<sup>25</sup>

## Rousseau’s Break with Locke’s Enlightenment

In his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau lists Bacon, Descartes and Newton as “preceptors of the human race,” leaving Locke off the triumvirate of Bacon, Locke and Newton. But it is to Locke whom we must turn to understand why Rousseau is more properly understood as a counter-Enlightenment, rather than an Enlightenment figure.<sup>26</sup> Locke’s *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* dismissed conscience as an innate practical principle; it is merely our opinion of right and wrong, contingent upon our education and social circumstances (*Essay* I.iii.8–13). In the first edition of the *Essay*, Locke dismissed natural law, dividing law into Divine Law, Civil Law and “the Philosophical Law, if I may so call it.” Philosophical Law is the rule of fashionable public opinion, conduct “as in each Country and Society are in reputation or discredit.” Social approbation or disapprobation governs human conduct and what “is every where called and esteemed Vertue and Vice.” If one understands human nature and history, one will see that most people “govern themselves chiefly, if not solely, by this Law of Fashion, and so they do that, which keeps in Reputation with their Company, [and] little regard the Laws of God, or the Magistrate.” Of course, our first concern should be “how is this acceptable to God. But the first question most men ask is: How will this render me to my company, and to those whose esteem I value? He that asks neither of those questions is a melancholy rogue, and always of the most dangerous and worst of

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 289. Bloom doubts that the Savoyard vicar is presenting Rousseau’s own teaching but the most memorable passages in the vicar’s account are word for word identical with Rousseau’s love letters to Sophie d’Houdetot.

<sup>26</sup> Locke’s philosophic *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* was far more widely read than his *Two Treatise of Government*. In the former work, conscience is dismissed as fallible opinion and natural law is supplanted by the law of fashion but, in the latter work, natural law and conscience have a central role to play in his political theory.

men.”<sup>27</sup> Rousseau’s contemporaries thought him a melancholy rogue and Nietzsche thought him dangerous and the worst of men. In *Daybreak*, # 499, Nietzsche cited Diderot on Rousseau: “‘Only the solitary man is evil,’ cried Diderot: and Rousseau at once felt morally offended.”

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, except for Rousseau, followed Locke’s view that human conduct is more effectively monitored by social approval and censure than by individual conscience or the private judgment of right and wrong. Claude Adrien Helvétius asserted: “Experience tells us, that every action which does not expose us to legal punishment, or to dishonor, is an action performed in general without remorse.”<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, “Taste [is] the knowledge of what merits the esteem of mankind.”<sup>29</sup> Paul Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, in “Common Sense, or Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural” elaborated Locke’s view of the power of social approbation or disapprobation as follows: “Conscience is the internal testimony, which we bear to ourselves, of having acted so as to merit the esteem or blame of the beings, with whom we live.” The Enlightenment was constituted by social beings whose conduct was regulated by the approval or disapproval of their peers, actors moved by the applause and fearing the scorn of their spectators, not by self-assessment or by an internalized divine monitor to judge right from wrong.

The enlightened word “consciousness” was first coined by Ralph Cudworth’s *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). Locke borrowed the term in his *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* and used it as that which constitutes selfhood or personal identity (*Essay* II.i.11; II.xxvii.16–17). Locke’s distinction between conscience and consciousness was welcomed in the eighteenth century as a means of differentiating human understanding from conscience as “the God within.” Christian Wolff’s translation of Locke’s *Essay* invented the word *Bewusstsein* (consciousness) to distinguish consciousness from

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<sup>27</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Basset, 1690), II.xxvii.7–12, pp. 158–159.

<sup>28</sup> Claude Adrien Helvétius, *A Treatise on Man; His Intellectual Faculties and His Education*, trans. W. Hooper (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), Vol. 1, p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De l’esprit* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1810, reprinted 1970), p. 408.

*Gewissen* (conscience). Pierre Coste's translation of Locke's *Essay* distinguished *Conscientia* or inner conviction from *Scientia* as common knowledge shared by all and used *conscience* for conscience and *conscience* for consciousness. Eighteenth-century English translations of the French *conscience* used conscience, consciousness or self-consciousness depending on the context.<sup>30</sup> Self-consciousness, Coste and Jean Leclerc thought, cannot be translated into French and thus thought consciousness "more commodious" than *conscience*. Leibniz suggested that the French adopt *consciosité* for *consciousness* but when the French academy rejected Leibniz's suggestion, Diderot's and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* lamented that "what the English express by the word consciousness can only be rendered in French by periphrasis."<sup>31</sup>

Locke thought reason, not conscience, should be the human guide but reason is unevenly distributed among human beings. Locke asserted that "the greatest part of Mankind, who are given up to Labour" are captives to "invincible ignorance." Indeed there are greater differences in understanding among human beings than between laborers and beasts (*Essay*, IV.xx.5, 8). As Losurdo (760–2, 987–89) pointed out in comparing liberal to Nietzschean doctrine, Locke justified slavery, low wages and the brutal treatment of the unemployed on the basis of the differing reasoning ability among human beings. Against Rousseau's view (*Social Contract*, II.11) that "no citizen should be rich enough to be able to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself," Voltaire responded, in an article, "Equality" in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, with conscienceless reason: "In our unhappy world it is impossible for men living in society not to be divided into two classes, the one the rich who command, the other the poor who serve." Voltaire added; "The human race, such as it is, cannot subsist unless there is an infinity of useful men who possess nothing at all; for it is certain that a man who is well off will not leave his own land to come to till yours, and if you have need of a

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Glyn Davies, *Conscience as Consciousness: The Idea of Self-Awareness in French Philosophic Writing from Descartes to Diderot* (Oxford, The Voltaire Society, 1990), Chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Diderot et Jean D'Alembert, *L'Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (New York: Readex Microprint Corporation, 1969), t. 3, p. 902.

pair of shoes, it is not the Secretary to the Privy Council who will make them for you.”<sup>32</sup>

Rousseau’s moral and political populism was anathema to Nietzsche. But was Nietzsche right to link Rousseau to the French Revolution and the Jacobin terror? Is the appeal to the innate conscience of human beings more revolutionary than the Enlightenment view that human conduct should be subjected to social approval or disapproval? I have indicated the reasons why Rousseau’s central ideas were antithetical to Locke and the mainstream of the French Enlightenment and thus why the conjunction of Enlightenment and the French Revolution is wrong. Jonathan Israel’s conception of a democratic Enlightenment is misleading if Rousseau opposed, rather than endorsed, Enlightenment.<sup>33</sup> But could it be argued that the counter-Enlightenment Rousseau animated the French Revolution?

The belief that Rousseau was “so dear to the Jacobins,” “Robespierre’s teacher” (Losurdo, 250, 273, 290, 627, 918), the intellectual source of Jacobinism and the Terror, is by no means confined to Nietzsche and Losurdo. Although it is often assumed that the moderates during the French Revolution followed Locke and Montesquieu and the radicals followed Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire inspired Robespierre, Marat, Saint-Just and Desmoulins as much as their reading of Rousseau.<sup>34</sup>

Robert Darnton distinguished the High Enlightenment (those with royal or aristocratic patronage, denizens of *salons*) from the Low Enlightenment (hack writers without patronage who inhabited Parisian cafés, like Jacques Pierre Brissot) and concluded that the latter, not the former,

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<sup>32</sup> Voltaire, “Equality” in *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 246.

<sup>33</sup> I write so-called democratic enlightenment because, if Rousseau was the most radical and democratic thinker of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as Nietzsche thought, and if Rousseau is more a romantic critic of enlightenment than a proponent of enlightenment, then Jonathan Israel’s democrats amongst the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment were Baron d’Holbach and the Marquis de Condorcet. See Jonathan Israel, *Democratic enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Andrew, *Imperial Republics*, 140–141.

were instrumental in the French Revolution.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Darnton noted: “The *Encyclopédie* treated the state with more respect than the church, and it did not contest the supremacy of the privileged orders.”<sup>36</sup> The High Enlightenment did not want to bite the hand that feeds it. The exception to this rule, if Rousseau is considered to be an integral part of the Enlightenment, was Jean-Jacques, a recipient of royal and aristocratic patronage. Voltaire, Diderot, D’Alembert and Hume thought Rousseau monstrously ungrateful. Ingratitude is the worst of evils in a patronage economy governed by the three graces—gracious giving, grateful receiving and graceful requiting.<sup>37</sup> Rousseau wrote to his *ami-protecteur*, Lamoignon de Malesherbes, that, owing to his love of independence, he was reluctant to receive favors: “For every benefit demands gratitude; and I feel my heart to be ungrateful from the very fact alone that gratitude is a duty.” Was this the expression of the plebeian resentment that Nietzsche thought fired the revolution against the *ancien régime*?

## Patronage and Enlightenment

Kant declared Enlightenment to be intellectual autonomy, casting aside the authority of church and state, and thinking for oneself. However, Kant asserted the age of Enlightenment is the age of Frederick the Great

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), Chapter 1–2. The Marquis de Condorcet was an exception to Darnton’s observation that the High Enlightenment did not participate in the French Revolution. Although Condorcet does not appear in *Nietzsche: The Aristocratic Rebel*, he plays a large role in Losurdo’s *Class Struggle: A Political and Philosophical History*, trans Gregory Elliot (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and his *Liberalism: A Counter-History* for his support for the slave revolution in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1791. Condorcet may well have been in Losurdo’s mind in pairing the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, or perhaps Diderot since Losurdo misinterpreted Diderot and Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux Indes* as an anti-imperialist manifesto, whereas it advocates a French empire of trade to contest British dominance in the East and West Indies conquered from the French in the Seven Years War. See Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, 135, 138, 168–169, 314–315 and Andrew, *Imperial Republics*, 136–139.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap Press, 1979), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Andrew, *Patrons of Enlightenment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), Chapter 1 and 7.



(who gave his patronage and protection to Kant, Rousseau, Voltaire, La Mettrie and many other philosophers, scientists and mathematicians). Kant wrote: "But only a ruler who is himself enlightened and has no fear of phantoms, yet who likewise has at hand a well-disciplined and numerous army to guarantee public security, may say what no republic would dare to say: *Argue as much as you like and whatever you like, but obey!*" Bentham intoned a similar credo—speak freely and obey punctually.<sup>38</sup> Diderot wrote: "We must speak out against senseless laws until they're reformed and, in the meantime, abide by them."<sup>39</sup> Kant's Enlightenment slogan, *Sapere aude!* appears to champion freedom of speech and counters revolutionary action. Monarchies, Kant felt, are more disposed to intellectual freedom than republics.<sup>40</sup>

Besides Frederick, the other great patron of the age of Enlightenment was Catherine who patronized Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert, Grimm, Marmontel, Galiani, Condorcet, Bentham and other thinkers in order to present Russia with an enlightened exterior to Europe. Diderot and Voltaire suppressed the French ambassador's account of Catherine's *coup d'état*, her murder of her husband and then of the heir to the throne.<sup>41</sup> Voltaire wrote to Catherine, signing himself "The priest of your temple" as follows: "Your writings are a monument to your fame; there are three of us, Diderot, D'Alembert and myself, who raise altars to you; you are making a pagan of me: madam, I fall at your majesty's feet not merely with profound respect, but in idolatry."<sup>42</sup> In addition to monarchic patronage, aristocratic salons nourished and protected *les lumières*; British aristocrats, such as the first Earl of Shaftesbury, the first Marquess of Hertford, the 3rd Duke of Argyll and the 2nd earl of Shelburne patronized Locke, Hume, Smith, Bentham and (even friends of the French Revolution) Price and Priestley.

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<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. R. Lewinter (Paris: Société encyclopédique française et le Club français du livre, 1972), t. 10, 249.

<sup>40</sup> "What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 58–59.

<sup>41</sup> *Voltaire and Catherine the Great: Selected Correspondence*, ed. A. Lentin, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Stuart Andrews, *Enlightened Despotism* (London: Longmans, 1967), 141.

Another factor that may have wedded the French Enlightenment to the *ancien régime* was the widespread use of standards of taste in eighteenth-century discourse. Prior to the eighteenth century, no one thought there was anything interesting to say about taste since the taste was obviously subjective. The age-old maxims “*De gustibus non est disputandum*” and “*chacun à son goût*” attest to the pointlessness of argument and the impossibility of establishing agreement about conflicting tastes. Yet the eighteenth century was preoccupied with establishing standards of taste that would command universal assent. Indeed, for Immanuel Kant, to assert the subjectivity of taste was to convict oneself of tastelessness; judgments of taste are “singular judgments” but have “a subjective universal validity.”<sup>43</sup> Many of the examples of Kant’s judgments of taste derived from Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The skeptic Hume, in his essay “Of the Standard of Taste,” thought that although “beauty and deformity ... are not qualities in objects, but ... it must be allowed, that there are certain objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.” Taste, Hume asserted, is “the perfection of a man.” The progenitor of taste-discourse was Locke’s student, the third Earl of Shaftesbury who wished to revivify Platonic ideas of beauty and goodness. Shaftesbury’s aim was “to correct our taste” so as to counter the calculating bourgeois egoism of his Hobbesian teacher, John Locke. Shaftesbury was enthusiastically received in France. Diderot’s first published work was a translation of Shaftesbury; taste was the subject of Montesquieu’s only contribution to the *Encyclopédie* and was the grounds of Voltaire’s claim, in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, to aristocratic status—taste is the preserve of “a very small number of privileged souls.” Taste includes the tasteful and excludes the tasteless. The hierarchy of taste is not a hereditary aristocracy but neither does it flourish in an egalitarian republic; it accords with the patronage economy of the *ancien régime*. Burke defined patronage as “the tribute which opulence owes to

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<sup>43</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. John H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 49, 183.

genius.”<sup>44</sup> The *protégé’s* genius adds to the luster of opulent patrons and their reputation as persons of taste.

Nietzsche’s and Losurdo’s belief that the French Enlightenment undermined the ideological buttress of the *ancien régime* by its criticism of intolerant French Catholicism is questionable. The internecine conflict between the Jansenists, Jesuits and Gallicans might have been at least a significant factor in weakening the authority of the Church as Enlightenment teaching. Jansenists flourished at the time of the Fronde (in which some of its members participated) but were suppressed after the papal bull *Unigenitus* in 1713 and Cardinal Fleury’s *lettres de cachet* taken out against priests who would not accede to the papal bull. However, the Jansenists got their revenge against the Jesuits, who were expelled from France in 1764 after Jansenist factions in the Paris *parlement* called for their expulsion, supported by Gallicans whose loyalty was to French bishops rather than the pope. Jansenist lobbying against *lettres de cachet* continued until the French Revolution.

Nor is it evident that Robespierre and the Jacobins were Rousseau’s heirs, as Nietzsche and Losurdo claimed. Nietzsche was not a historical contextualist and thus paired Robespierre and Rousseau as examples of plebeian resentment exploding into a rage. However, Losurdo contextualized Nietzsche’s thought in relation to the prevailing ideas of his contemporaries but never contextualizes the French Revolution in terms of war debt or the Jacobin Terror in terms of British blockades, crop failures and foreign troops on French soil. Although the Jacobins admired Montesquieu and Voltaire as much as Rousseau, neither Montesquieu nor Voltaire has been blamed for Jacobin outrages.

My central point, however, is that the French Enlightenment was not predominantly egalitarian, that Rousseau was not a prototypical Enlightener but rather a populist critic of those who would like to enlighten from above—through education and socialization by public approval or censure. My criticism of Losurdo’s and Beiner’s understanding of the French Enlightenment does not mean that I do not wholeheartedly agree with their central thesis; namely, Nietzsche was a dangerous

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<sup>44</sup> Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 271.

thinker who contributed to the politics of right-wing resentment in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, Losurdo's Marxist comparison of Nietzschean doctrines and liberalism distinguishes him from Beiner's championship of political moderation, his commendation of social democracy or liberal democracy with robust health and welfare systems.

## Losurdo's Anti-Liberalism

Losurdo contextualization of Nietzsche's racism, imperialism, eugenics and genocide draws our attention to Constant's, Tocqueville's and John Stuart Mill's support for Eurocentric and racist imperialism. He does not mention Marx and Engels' championship of capitalist imperialism in *The Communist Manifesto* or Marx's articles in the New York *Herald Tribune* in the early 1850s supporting the French slaughter of Algerians, the famine in India for rescuing the sub-continent from Oriental despotism, or the British opium trade for extricating China "from vegetating in the teeth of time." Marx later discovered positive features in pre-capitalist economic formations and became a less enthusiastic supporter of European imperialism. Losurdo (485) wrote that Oriental despotism was denounced by Montesquieu and other liberal writers. Surely, Losurdo knew that Marx was as afflicted as Tocqueville and Mill were with nineteenth-century notions of Oriental despotism and stagnation contrasted with Occidental technological and commercial progress.

In his *Class Struggle: A Political and Philosophical History* and *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, Losurdo emphasizes the message of *Nietzsche: The Aristocratic Rebel*; namely, the solemn complement to liberal principles (of individual freedom, toleration, limited government and human rights) was slavery, racism and colonial oppression. Liberalism is anarchism for proprietors and police for the propertyless; liberal societies are master-race republics. Losurdo qualifies the critiques of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi by indicating that what Nietzsche preached was what liberal societies practiced. Losurdo seems to be saying that Nietzsche was the truth of liberalism, as Nazism was the truth of capitalism; he suggests that only Marxism is a real alternative to Nietzsche's genocidal policies

put into practice by the Nazis. Igor Shoikedbrod has provided us with a more nuanced view of Marx's understanding of liberalism, emphasizing that Marx did not advocate the abolition of liberal rights and the rule of law but rather their maintenance in a higher form in accordance with the socialization of the means of production.<sup>45</sup>

Imperialism is integral to Losurdo's view of capitalism. Not only does capital search for, and attempt to monopolize areas of profitable investment, trade and raw materials in the underdeveloped world but also it needs to provide crumbs from the imperial table to the workers in advanced capitalist countries to prevent strikes and revolutions. Since the working class of capitalist countries has been bought off by imperialism, democratic socialism is impossible. Only a vanguard party with an awareness of imperialist oppression on an international level can lead workers in developed and underdeveloped countries to socialism. Here Losurdo departs from his compatriot, Antonio Gramsci, who thought the top-down command structure of Lenin's Bolsheviks derived from the peculiarities of Tsarist autocracy (rather than a universal condition of opposing capitalist imperialism). Gramsci thought that in an autocratic state where unions and political parties were outlawed, and police spies infiltrated underground organizations, the secret, top-down party organization was essential to combat a police state and win a war of maneuver but such a form of party organization is unjustified in Western Europe where communists have to win a war of position or a culture war.

Owing to the centrality of his critique of capitalist imperialism, Losurdo sees an unbroken continuity from Marx's and Engels' class dictatorship of the proletariat, through Lenin's and Stalin's Communist party's dictatorship to Xi Jinping's autocracy. Losurdo may have justified the Russian Revolution with Lenin's theory of imperialism but Losurdo's justification is not identical to a claim that Lenin's theory of imperialism caused the Russian Revolution. Imperial rivalry, rather than a theory of imperialism, caused the Russian Revolution, just as the costs of the wars between England and France, not Enlightenment doctrines, caused the French Revolution. However, he thinks the French Revolution was

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<sup>45</sup> Igor Shoikedbrod, *Revisiting Marx's Critique of Liberalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

the effect of, and justified by, the allegedly egalitarian and progressive Enlightenment thought. Losurdo thinks ideas or ideologies play a dominant role in history, a view more common among historians of ideas than among historical materialists. Losurdo asserts the primacy of the Communist parties depends on their greater awareness of anti-imperialist struggles of which Russian and Chinese worker, peasants and students are not fully cognizant. In the face of imperialist aims to dismember China of Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, and to prevent the rise of a Chinese Yeltsin, Losurdo justifies the Tiananmen Square Massacre.<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche thought Rousseau's egalitarianism bred fanaticism. Might not the same be said of Losurdo's egalitarianism?

One might question whether Chinese imperialism will be more enlightened than European and American imperialism. Whether or not one subscribes to Marx's view that the state-centered hydraulic systems (to regulate floods and irrigate land) of the east mark a fundamental difference from the rainfall economies of the West, Imperial China never had a hereditary aristocracy; its system of partible inheritance, rather than the unjust Western practice of primogeniture, meant that dominant families never lasted more than three generations on the top of the social ladder.<sup>47</sup> China thus never had the decentralizing features of European feudalism that became a feature of Western liberalism, where aristocratic privileges, such as outlined in *Magna Carta*, came to be universalized as human rights. The French Enlightenment would be split on the prospects of an enlightened Chinese empire with Voltaire's and Diderot's attraction to meritocracy and despotism inclining in one direction and Montesquieu's, Tocqueville's and the plebeian Rousseau's contempt for despotism inclining in the other direction.<sup>48</sup>

Hegel and Nietzsche provided contending retrospective views of the French Revolution. Goethe's "Am Anfang war die Tat" found philosophic expression in Hegel's owl of Minerva that flies only at the falling of dusk. Marx and Nietzsche wanted to change the world, not merely interpret it. One could ask whether the project of changing the world includes

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<sup>46</sup> Losurdo, *Class Struggle*, 293, 336.

<sup>47</sup> Ping-Ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility 1368–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

<sup>48</sup> Simon Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

changing the past. Both Marx and Nietzsche thought interpreting the French Revolution in their different ways was integral to changing the world. My aim has been more modest; my argument has been that the French Revolution was anti-Enlightenment. However, that claim is not grounds for condemning either the Enlightenment or the French Revolution, just the causal connection between the two.

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# Not Beyond Politics: The Metapolitical Dimensions of Nietzsche's Anti-Democratism in *Beyond Good and Evil*

Matthew Sharpe

## An Interpretive Experiment

Our ability today to read Friedrich Nietzsche's extraordinary body of work is affected by the remarkable weight of commentary that it has already produced, and the passionate untimely identifications the German philosopher of the Second Reich continues to produce. For a long time a key, avowed inspiration of movements of the political Far Right, Nietzsche was reborn in the anglosphere, and Parisian academe, as a rebellious, individualistic hero of the New Left after 1960, a philosopher of difference, an antipolitical friend to artists who "would not hurt a fly", as Hitchcock's Norman Bates said. Nietzsche nevertheless continued to be admired on the anti-liberal Right after World War II. And today,

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once more, he is heroized by the growing chorus of “Alt-right” intellectuals, as well as the populations of disenfranchised young men who have always seen his work as a source of understanding and emboldening.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will seek to recover from beneath the thick layers of post-Kaufmannian/Deleuzian/de Mannian ideas and receptions of a liberal or apolitical, “postmodern” Nietzsche<sup>2</sup> the multidimensional, philosophical, ethical, and political opposition to liberalism, democracy, and socialism that undergirds Nietzsche’s later, 1883–1889 works. It will focus upon *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche called this his “most beautiful” work. Commentators agree that it represents one of the later texts in which he tries to give less rhapsodic expression to the epoch-shaking teachings of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. It is also demonstrably his most political text or the text in whose fragments Nietzsche most often returns in particular to his hostility to egalitarianism in its democratic and socialist forms.

To pursue this excavation—I had nearly said a hermeneutic “archaeology”—let us begin with an experiment. Let us imagine ourselves into the shoes of someone who has never read Nietzsche before, who has a philosophical training, but as yet belongs to no philosophical sect. In these imaginative shoes, let us then take up Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* and read the culminating two–three sections of each of its non-apophoristic Parts, starting at the beginning.<sup>3</sup> Given our concerns, let us suppose that this reader will be especially attentive to ideas which have political implications.

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<sup>1</sup> See esp. Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> On the genealogy here, see Robert Holub, “Nietzsche as Postmodernist”, *Postmodern Culture. Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought on Contemporary Cultures*. Online at <https://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/26/nietzsche-as-postmodernist>. See also Jan Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodernist Nietzscheanism: Deleuze and Foucault*, translated by Kolja Swingle Larry Swingle (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> We will use here Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Helen Zimmern, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Edinburgh and London: T.N. Foulis, 1909–1913), except in cases of arguable mistranslation, wherein the original German will be placed in brackets. See the German edition of the text at The Project Gutenberg eBook of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Due to frequency of citation, we will cite *Beyond Good and Evil* in the text as “BGE”, followed by the section number.

At the end of Part 1, “The Prejudices of the Philosophers”, Nietzsche gives a strikingly political reading of the modern sciences. In a way our reader might find unusual, even potentially reductive and radically anti-realistic, the philosopher tells us in §22 that the notion of natural laws like gravity, held to apply universally, reflect the wider egalitarian, political orientation of scientists, not the things in themselves or even as they invariably appear to us under controlled conditions:

‘Everywhere equality before the law—Nature is not different in that respect, nor better than we’ [an interlocutor says]: a fine instance of secret motive, in which the vulgar antagonism to everything privileged and autocratic—likewise a second and more refined atheism—is once more disguised. ‘*Ni dieu, ni maitre*’—that, also, is what you want; and therefore ‘Cheers for natural law!—is it not so?’. (BGE, §22)

Nietzsche’s reply points to a different politics of interpreting nature:

But, as has been said, that is interpretation, not text; and somebody might come along, who, with opposite intentions and modes of interpretation, could read out of the same ‘Nature’, and with regard to the same phenomena, just the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of the claims of power—an interpreter who should so place the unexceptionalness and unconditionalness of all ‘Will to Power’ before your eyes, that almost every word, and the word “tyranny” itself, would eventually seem unsuitable, or like a weakening and softening metaphor—as being too human. (BGE, §22)

Part II, on “Free Spirits”, ends in §44 by disillusioning all of those who might take Nietzsche’s praise for creative, playful, exuberant, critical intellectuals as aligning the German thinker with the kind of liberal “free spirits” of the eighteenth-century French enlightenment:

Briefly and regrettably, they belong to the *levellers*, these wrongly named ‘free spirits’—as glib-tongued and scribe-fingered slaves of the democratic taste and its ‘modern ideas’, all of them men without solitude, without personal solitude, blunt honest fellows to whom neither courage nor honorable conduct ought to be denied, only, they are not free, and are

ludicrously superficial, especially in their innate partiality for seeing the cause of almost *all* human misery and failure in the old forms in which society has hitherto existed ... (BGE, §44)

Nietzsche underscores that the free spirits *he* would address, to herald the “philosophers of the future” of his book’s subtitle (BGE, §44), will have no truck with the enlighteners’ moral sympathy, and egalitarian concern for the educability of every woman:

We opposite ones, however, who have opened our eye and conscience to the question how and where the plant ‘man’ has hitherto grown most vigorously, believe that this has always taken place under the opposite conditions, that for this end the dangerousness of his situation had to be increased enormously, his inventive faculty and dissembling power (his ‘spirit’) had to develop into subtlety and daring under long oppression and compulsion, and his Will to Life had to be increased to the unconditioned Will to Power—we believe that severity, violence, slavery, danger in the street and in the heart, secrecy, stoicism, tempter’s art and devilry of every kind—that everything wicked, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and serpentine in man, serves as well for the elevation of the human species as its opposite—we do not even say enough when we only say *this much*, and in any case we find ourselves here, both with our speech and our silence, at the *other* extreme of all modern ideology and gregarious desirability, as their antipodes perhaps? (BGE, §44)

Somewhat unsettled, not least by this seeming condoning of “everything wicked, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and serpentine in man”, our reader next turns to the closing sections of “The Religious Essence (*Wesen*)”, §§61–62. Here, she learns more about Nietzsche’s addressees, or their goal: “[t]he philosopher, as *we* free spirits understand him” (BGE §61). Such philosophers seem to be engaged in political rule. Indeed, Nietzsche speaks about them as potentially leading entire peoples, using the most illiberal, indeed serpentine means:

as the man of the greatest responsibility, who has the conscience for the general development of mankind—will use religion for his breeding [*zuchtung*] and educating work, just as he will use the contemporary

political and economic conditions. The selecting and breeding influence—destructive, as well as creative and fashioning—which can be exercised by means of religion is manifold and varied, according to the sort of people placed under its spell and protection ... (BGE, §61)

Nietzsche, our reader might suppose, is here proposing the Machiavellian, atheistic political use of religion as an instrument of the state, or of domination—and, if anything, in a much more open way than Machiavelli ever did.<sup>4</sup> The remainder of §61 confirms this sense, as we are told that religion serves politically to bind followers compliantly to leaders, and allows culturally refined leaders “a means for obtaining peace from the noise and trouble of managing *grosser* affairs, and for securing immunity from the *unavoidable* filth of all political agitation”. As for ordinary citizens, religions serve as what Marx called “opium of the people”, and should be used as such, since the ordinary people cannot aspire to higher things:

And finally, to ordinary men, to the majority of the people, who exist for service and general utility, and are only so far entitled to exist, religion gives invaluable contentedness with their lot and condition, peace of heart, ennoblement of obedience, additional social happiness and sympathy, with something of transfiguration and embellishment, something of justification of all the commonplaceness, all the meanness, all the semi-animal poverty of their souls. (BGE, §61)

Our reader will surely by now be forming a picture of a radically aristocratic thinker, who does not question but looks to reinstate on new bases hierarchical rank orderings in societies, of a kind liberal and democratic societies—or at least, their ideals—have challenged since 1776 or

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche *Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, in *Complete Works of Nietzsche*, translated by M. Ludovici (Edinburgh & London: T.N. Foulis, 1914), §144. On Nietzsche's Machiavellianism, see Don Dombowsky, *Nietzsche's Machiavellian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). On the political use of religion as means of breeding, see Domenico Losurdo *Nietzsche, Aristocratic Rebel*, translated by G. Benton (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 448–452 and, in support of the prospect as part of Nietzsche's elevated “philanthropy”, Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 150–151; cf. 92, note 20.

1789. Religion is not to be put aside in this new philosophical aristocratism, famous claims that “God is dead” notwithstanding (let’s assume our reader knows at least this much about Nietzsche). No, religion has its uses, beyond good and evil. There, it is to be used as an instrument to keep the lower ranks in their place, contentedly, so they do not produce the “filth” involved in popular rebellion.

With this much said, the successor §62 will hardly comfort this reader, presuming she has been raised in one of the liberal or democratic societies. Nietzsche turns here to his criticisms of Christianity in particular, but also Judaism, its progenitor:

What, then, is the attitude of the two greatest religions above-mentioned to the *surplus* of failures in life? They endeavor to preserve and keep alive whatever can be preserved; in fact, as the religions *for sufferers*, they take the part of these upon principle; they are always in favor of those who suffer from life as from a disease, and they would fain treat every other experience of life as false and impossible ... (BGE, §62)

Our reader would be right to suspect a complete absence of any compassion in our philosopher for “failures” or “sufferers”, whomever she assumes these unfortunates to be: perhaps the poor, perhaps the weak or disabled, perhaps minorities or groups otherwise disadvantaged. While Nietzsche admits that some “spiritual men” have been produced by the great monotheistic traditions:

when they had given comfort to the sufferers, courage to the oppressed and despairing, a staff and support to the helpless, and when they had allured from society into convents and spiritual penitentiaries the broken-hearted and distracted: what else had they to do in order to work systematically in that fashion, and with a good conscience, for the preservation of all the sick and suffering, which means, in deed and in truth, to work for the *deterioration of the European race*? (BGE, §62).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Christianity, which springs from a Jewish root and is understandable only as growth on this soil, represents the countermovement to every morality of breeding, of race, of privilege”. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, translated by M. Ludovici (Edinburgh & London: Foulis, 1911), “Improvers”, §4.

At this point, the reader might be suspecting that this text has to date from the later nineteenth century. For it clearly shares common concerns with the texts in eugenics which were being circulated around Europe, in the wake of the bombshell 1859 appearance of Charles Darwin's work on the "descent of man". She might also be struck by the growing vehemence of our philosopher's rhetoric, which seethes with anger, not simply at the history of the monotheistic religions, but at the modern successor societies, in ways which might have her questioning whether this text is a philosophical treatise, or a polemical pamphlet. These religions, the section closes, have bred:

Men, not great enough, nor hard enough, to be entitled as artists to take part in fashioning *man*; men, not sufficiently strong and far-sighted to *allow*, with sublime self-constraint, the obvious law of the thousand-fold failures and perishings to prevail; men, not sufficiently noble to see the radically different grades of rank and intervals of rank that separate man from man:—*such* men, with their 'equality before God', have hitherto swayed the destiny of Europe; until at last a dwarfed, almost ludicrous species has been produced, a gregarious animal, something obliging, sickly, mediocre, the European of the present day. (BGE, §62)

Our reader wonders about what this "obvious law of thousandfold failures and perishings" which should be allowed to prevail might mean. She is also unsure, disbelieving, about whether "the European of the present day" means the citizens of modern liberal democracies. With these concerns growing, our reader next turns to §§202–203, the end of Part V, "The Natural History of Morals". And here, clarity is not slow in coming, with typical rhetorical force. The philosopher now delivers some of "our truths"—and he clearly means by the pronoun his own truths, and the truths of those "free spirits" who understand his business.

We know well enough how offensive it sounds when anyone plainly, and without metaphor, counts man among the animals, but it will be accounted to us almost a *crime*, that it is precisely in respect to men of 'modern ideas' that we have constantly applied the terms 'herd', 'herd-instincts', and such like expressions. What avail is it? We cannot do otherwise, for it is precisely here that our new insight is. (BGE, §202).

Our reader now knows that Nietzsche's "new insight" about the vast majority of his contemporaries is that the "semi-animal poverty of their souls" means that they can be spoken of as effectively bovine. There can be little doubt, although our reader may have hesitations: "morality in Europe is herd animal morality". But now the politics of this situation becomes clearer. For it is indeed democracy which is at fault here, for inheriting the egalitarianism of the Christian religion which she knows Nietzsche thinks has "made a sublime abortion" (and forgive the language (§62)) of the human species:

Indeed, with the help of a religion which has humored and flattered the sublimest desires of the herd animal, things have reached such a point that we always find a more visible expression of this morality even in political and social arrangements: the *democratic* movement is the inheritance of the Christian movement. (BGE, §201)

The Nietzschean alternative recalls the Machiavellian philosopher-leaders from the sequence §§61–62:

We, who hold a different belief—we, who regard the democratic movement, not only as a degenerating form of political organization, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning type of man, as involving his mediocrizing and depreciation: where have *we* to fix our hopes? In *new philosophers*— (BGE, §201)

Our reader is surprised here that, of all people, philosophers are presented as the *only* alternative to "the democratic movement, not only as a degenerating form of political organization, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning type of man" (BGE, §203). Having a good memory, she nevertheless supposes that she is about to hear more about the philosophers engaged in the anti-democratic, political use of religion as instrument of control at the end of "The Religious Essence" (BGE, §§61–62). She is again right here. But the political role she was surprised to see assigned to these figures earlier—as *philosophers*—now takes on a metapolitical, almost civilizational dimension. The new philosophers will consist:



in forerunners, in men of the future, who in the present shall fix the constraints and fasten the knots which will compel millennia to take *new paths*. To teach man the future of humanity as his *will*, as depending on human will, *and to make preparation for vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempts in breeding and educating, in order thereby to put an end to the frightful rule of folly and chance which has hitherto gone by the name of 'history'* (the folly of the 'greatest number' is only its last form)—for that purpose a new type of philosopher and commander will some time or other be needed, at the very idea of which everything that has existed in the way of occult, terrible, and benevolent beings might look pale and dwarfed ... (BGE, §203 [our italics])

Our reader takes a few things from this. First, she sees that these new philosophers are going to overcome the order of chance that has hitherto governed human evolution, which is hardly an ordinary political end. To set the path for future generations, perhaps reaching forward for millennia: this is metapolitical, more than political, although one must presume that “vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempts in breeding and educating” will involve illiberal political means. Second, she sees that modern societies, in which the happiness of the greatest number becomes a decisive consideration for government, are aligned by the philosopher with the “frightful rule of folly and chance which has hitherto gone by the name of ‘history’”, and as such, will have to be overthrown. The polemical end of §203 will confirm it:

The *universal degeneracy of mankind* to the level of the ‘man of the future’—as idealized by the socialistic fools and shallow-pates—this degeneracy and dwarfing of man to an absolutely gregarious animal (or as they call it, to a man of ‘free society’), this brutalizing of man into a pigmy with equal rights and claims, is undoubtedly *possible*! He who has thought out this possibility to its ultimate conclusion knows *another* loathing unknown to the rest of mankind—and perhaps also a new *mission*! (BGE, §203)

Third, she notices that our philosopher warns that these new philosopher-commanders will represent beings in comparison to which

“everything that has existed in the way of occult, terrible, and benevolent beings might look pale and dwarfed” (BGE, §203). She is used to this kind of unbalanced tough talk from §44, with its “severity, violence, slavery, danger in the street and in the heart, secrecy, stoicism, tempter’s art and devilry of every kind”, and she also remembers from §22 that Nietzsche had counterposed to the egalitarian scientists, someone who would interpret physical reality in view of “the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of the claims of power” (§22). At this point, so much evidence has accumulated that—let us say it—our reader for the first time feels a wave of *fear and dread*. For she is reading this book we have given her, in the twenty-first century. She knows what “terrible” “occult” “devilry” has been used by rulers on their populations after Nietzsche, even sometimes invoking his name. But she has probably never before read it being given philosophical sanction by a philosopher widely taught as canonical.

If she turns to the close of section VI, “We Scholars” for reassurance—*surely no philosopher could be proposing radically inhumane measures, on principle?*—it is unclear that her anxiety will be appeased. Nietzsche is here again talking about his philosophers of the future. He is going to pains to compare them to “scholars” of the like we know today, who at most can do intellectual handiwork. Confirming the sequences of §§61–62 and §§202–3, these philosophers are political men, at the same time as, very properly, they far exceed the horizon of merely democratic politicking:

*The real philosophers, however, are commanders and law-givers [Befehlende und Gesetzgeber]; they say: ‘Thus shall it be!’ They determine first the Whither and the Why of mankind, and thereby set aside the previous labour of all philosophical workers, and all subjugators of the past—they grasp at the future with a creative hand, and whatever is and was, becomes for them thereby a means, an instrument, and a hammer. Their ‘knowing’ is creating, their creating is a law-giving, their will to truth is—will to power.—Are there at present such philosophers? Have there ever been such philosophers? Must there not be such philosophers some day? ...* (BGE, §211)

Our reader does not know the answer to this question. In truth, the continuing Nietzschean identification of philosophy, the search for wisdom, with commanding other human beings—what he even terms in §204 the “master task and supremacy” of philosophy, to “*rule* (*herrschen*)!”—does not sit well with her. She is more familiar with academic philosophers, who hardly seem fit for, or concerned with, ruling or “breeding” others. But she notes that it is “law” [*Gesetz*] that Nietzsche’s new philosophers will be creating, not “values”—and, once again, what else could be involved in “vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempts in breeding and educating” (BGE, §203) except a program which will, to say the least, have certain political effects? An appeal to a “will to power [*Macht*]” as determinative, as against any norms governing human interaction, also gels too well—or too badly—with what she has already encountered (§22).

Our reader is left again to suppose that she is in the presence of a radically anti-modern, anti-egalitarian philosophy which furnishes one possible justification for “enlightened autocracy”—meaning not by this an appeal to the historical, liberalizing enlightenment (see §44), but the idea of rule by a culturally superior, self-vindicating elite, who lay claim to higher breeding, and the natural right to suspend all normative obligations to the lower classes.<sup>6</sup> The close of §213 confirms her reading, if more confirmation were needed:

People have always to be born to a high station, or, more definitely, they have to be *bred* for it: a person has only a right to philosophy—taking the word in its higher significance—in virtue of his descent; the ancestors, the ‘blood’ [*Blut*], decide here also. Many generations must have prepared the way for the coming of the philosopher; each of his virtues must have been separately acquired, nurtured, transmitted, and embodied; not only the bold, easy, delicate course and current of his thoughts, but above all the readiness for great responsibilities, the majesty of ruling glance and contemning look, the feeling of separation from the multitude with their duties and virtues, the kindly patronage and defense of whatever

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<sup>6</sup> See BGE §260: “A morality of the ruling class, however, is more especially foreign and irritating to present-day taste in the sternness of its principle that one has duties only to one’s equals; that one may act towards beings of a lower rank, towards all that is foreign, just as seems good to one, or ‘as the heart desires,’ and in any case ‘beyond good and evil’”.

is misunderstood and calumniated, be it God or devil, the delight and practice of supreme justice, the art of commanding, the amplitude of will, the lingering eye which rarely admires, rarely looks up, rarely loves ... (BGE, §213)

Let us end this exercise by saying delicately that by the time our reader has made her way through Nietzsche's closing sections §§232–9 of "Our Virtues" and been confronted by "my truths" (§231) about the fairer sex—and she has encountered Nietzsche's women as "stupidity in the kitchen" (§234) and the ringing denunciation of feminism as leading to "the general *uglification* of Europe" (§232)—she will be thinking many things. But these cannot reasonably include supposing that Nietzsche was a friend to, let alone an advocate for, any forms of liberalism, democracy, socialism, or the woman's movement:

on the other hand, a man who has depth of spirit as well as of desires, and has also the depth of benevolence which is capable of severity and harshness, and easily confounded with them, can only think of woman as *orientals* do: he must conceive of her as a possession, as confinable property, as a being predestined for service and accomplishing her mission therein. (BGE, §238)

We might forgive our reader at this point, in fact, for thinking of the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* as a singularly fiery, erudite, but cranky reactionary, seething with bitterness against a modern world which had clearly rejected him, and longing for authoritarian worlds in which he imagines he might fare better—the first "incel", as we might say today.

## On Kaufmann's "Antipolitical" Nietzsche

It is time now to take stock of what this exercise shows, as well as what its limitations are, and the questions which can (and will) be posed to it by "Left Nietzscheans", if this can be the term. What the selection of culminating sections from the first six parts of *BGE* shows is that, in his own voice, Nietzsche's text contains advocacy for:

a radically reductive politicization of science, which would see and decry egalitarianism even in the idea of natural laws;

a critique of the enlighteners for being too prodemocratic, their “freedom” of mind enslaved to egalitarian values;

a seething denunciation of Christianity for its egalitarianism, with the accusation that this has operated to “breed” weakened, emaciated races, by preserving the sick and suffering, who might better go under;

a radical reconception of philosophers, which commentators have rightly seen inverts but mirrors Plato’s in the *Republic* V-VII,<sup>7</sup> as ultimately claiming the rule of human beings, including by command and legislation, as “the Caesarian trainer[s] and dictator[s] of civilization” (§207);

an advocacy for political rule by philosophers who would use religion, without inner conviction, as “the principal means by which one can modify men into whatever one wants; provided one is possessed of an overflow of creative power, and can cause one’s will to prevail over long periods of time.”<sup>8</sup>

A denunciation of democracy for inherited ill-conceived Christian egalitarianism, and of its subjects, for being timid, conformist, bovine herd animals, or what Zarathustra called “last men”; The celebration of actions understood widely as “evil”, including violence, deceit, and enslavement, and the merciless acceptance of the “obvious law of thousandfold failings and perishings” (§62), by these philosopher-legislators, to carry out their self-appointed millennial “breeding” tasks.

Of course, we have presented here only (some of) the “affirmatives” for this vision here, and critics will be quick to use an apologetic strategy looking right back to Walter Kaufmann to defend the master thinker. This is to suggest that any reader of Nietzsche who finds in him consistent, highly inflammatory anti-liberal, and anti-democratic statements, with clear political referents, are “cherry picking”. It is true that we have so far cited less than 5% of *BGE*, albeit 5% taken from culminating

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<sup>7</sup> Alex McIntyre, “‘Virtuosos of Contempt’: An Investigation of Nietzsche’s Political Philosophy Through Certain Platonic Political Ideas”, *Nietzsche-Studien* 21(1992) 184–210; Catherine Zuckert, “Nietzsche’s Rereading of Plato”, *Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (1985): 213–238; and, above all, Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil*.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §144.

sections in Nietzsche's Parts, which suggests their especial significance for the author. Almost any commentary will involve such selections. Quotation becomes problematic if the selected texts (or their readings) misrepresent the sense of an author's views. They may violently abstract them from the different contexts in which they are placed, leading outwards from the immediate textual sequence, to the entire work, the entire oeuvre of an author, and perhaps his cultural context(s). Or they may be contradicted by many other things the author or work says in different places, either on the same or connected subjects.

However, we submit, this is overwhelmingly *not* the case with what we have read of *BGE*. As we will return to in 3 below, each of the ideas we find in these telling sections finds echoes and elaborations elsewhere in *BGE* but also the surrounding texts, *Anti-Christ*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, and the unpublished notes collected by editors as *Will to Power*. They each contribute their parts to what Nietzsche calls his "task" in *BGE*, the attempt to reinstate new aristocratic modes and orders (*BGE*, §251), predicated on reestablishing "rank order" between human beings (and within our wider sense of nature itself (*BGE*, §30, §32, §61, §62, §194, §204, §206, §219, §221, §228, §257, §260, §263, §265, §270, §272, §285, §287)), the existence of servile, slave classes (§257; cf. §189) who will be ruled by the political use of religion (§§62–63), whose very morality will differ from their masters' (§260, 272), and in which the "millions of failures" will be subject to "extermination"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For two examples of the kinds of passages at issue here for readers new to this truly dark subject: in the unpublished notebooks (reproduced in *Will to Power*), Nietzsche proposes that great politics will involve that capacity to: "Acquire that enormous energy of greatness in order, on the one hand by breeding and on the other by annihilating millions of those that have turned out badly, to shape the future human being and not to perish because of the pain that one creates and that is of a like one has never seen before". KSA, XI, 98; or there is the text of the *Grossoktav-Ausgabe*, vol. XIII, 43: "He that as a knowing person has acknowledged that in us, alongside growth of all kinds, the law of perishing is at the same time in force, and that annihilation and decay inexorably impose themselves at the end of every creation and generation: he must learn to experience a kind of joy at such a sight, in order to bear it, or he is no longer good for knowing. That is, he must be capable of a refined cruelty and get used to it with a resolute heart. If his force is even higher in the rank-ordering of forces, he himself is one of the creators and not just a spectator: so it is not enough that he is capable of cruelty only in seeing so much suffering, so much extinction, so much destruction; such a human being must be able to create pain with pleasure, to be cruel with hand and deed (and not just with the eyes of the spirit)". Cf. *Antichrist*, §2; *Ecce Homo*, "The Birth of Tragedy",

with a view to “breeding” more noble, post-democratic societies (§4, §203; §251, §262; cf. §242) beyond both the egalitarian teachings of “good and evil” and, ultimately, the old “frightful reign of chance and folly” that has hitherto governed the production, sufferings, and successes of higher men (§260).

On the contrary, the mystery with a text like *Beyond Good and Evil* is how it has been presented by commentators as anything less than this radical philosophical blueprint for a new, profoundly anti-democratic, anti-humane, and aristocratic order. Let us look here for instance at Kaufmann’s classic *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*<sup>10</sup>, whose author reads Nietzsche in a way that makes him oddly reminiscent of those “timid” moderns the nineteenth century philosopher reviles in *BGE* (§198, §201). “The leitmotif of Nietzsche’s life and thought”, Kaufmann instructs his readers, was “the theme of the antipolitical individual who seeks self-perfection far from the modern world”.<sup>11</sup> (His single proof text is *Ecce Homo*: “On the other hand, I am perhaps more German than modern Germans—mere Imperial Germans—can hope to be—I, the last antipolitical German”).<sup>12</sup> The benign presentation of the “modern world” here and the antipolitical withdrawal from it sounds Epicurean, as if the German thinker was a proponent of the *vita contemplativa*. Nietzsche’s higher men do, it is true, include Alexander, Alcibiades, Caesar, Cesare Borgia, and Napoleon, but we must understand that he nevertheless means to celebrate only “the philosophers, artists, and saints”.<sup>13</sup> For Nietzsche as allegedly for Goethe, “the individual had been a revelation”.<sup>14</sup>

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4; *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA), edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols (Munich-Berlin, 1980), XI, 69, 98, 102; XIII, 156, 220, 472–73; and see B.H.F. Taureck, “Civil Mass Murder: Nietzsche’s Political Options and the Shoah”, *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 33, no. 1 (2019): 83–97 with Losurdo, *Nietzsche*, ch. 11 & 19.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013). The text first appeared in 1950, so just five years after 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 418.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, translated by A.M. Ludovici (Edinburgh & London: TN Foulis, 1911), “Why I am so Wise”, §3.

<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 152.

<sup>14</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 415.

The presence of Caesar, Alcibiades, Borgia and Napoleon as clearly political men causes some trouble for Kaufmann<sup>15</sup>: it is as artists and masters of self-perfection that we are asked to admire them, not their prowess in the dictatorial domination of other human beings. The apologetic exegete is forced also to confront that the “modern world” the antipolitical Nietzsche seeks distance from is also a broadly democratic world, in which forms of liberal democracy and socialism have largely controlled governments, in Germany and elsewhere, since shortly after 1789.<sup>16</sup> There is an “aristocratic tendency” in Nietzsche, Kaufmann acknowledges<sup>17</sup>, albeit that the “tendency” here is unclear—as is why such an “aristocratism” could ever be simply antipolitical in a democratic age.

Kaufmann also finds no political issue (or even any *valence*) in Nietzsche’s essentializing depictions of individuals or groups—those given the franchise and private, civil, and political rights in liberal democratic states—as “weak” or a “herd”, as if this were politically innocuous.<sup>18</sup> He is forced by the texts to present Nietzsche’s key later distinction between master and slave moralities, looking back to a “slave revolt”.<sup>19</sup> But Kaufmann contentiously brushes aside this key *motif* from *Genealogy of*

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<sup>15</sup> At page 203 of his *Nietzsche*, Kaufmann notes *en passant*, that on top of self-mastery, “Alexander and Napoleon went out to conquer the world with their armed might...” On Borgia, see 225–226, and 416; on Napoleon, see 314–16. For a competing, and we would argue more adequate, presentation of Nietzsche’s evolving views on Napoleon, see Don Dombowsky, *Nietzsche and Napoleon: The Dionysian Conspiracy* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 149, 165, 187, 191, 285, 291–92.

<sup>17</sup> See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 149–151, 160–61, 174–76, 404–5.

<sup>18</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 138, 194, 199, 232, 250–52, 255, 266, 279–80, 281, 285, 293, 325, 355, 360, 364, 370, 371, 380, 388, 389, 397, 420.

<sup>19</sup> “One may wonder about the conception of master-morality and slave morality which is introduced in *Beyond Good and Evil* (260) and discussed further in the *Genealogy [of Morals]* (1). It is noteworthy that these two slogans play a comparatively small role in Nietzsche’s writings and that Gobineau’s allegedly decisive influence on Nietzsche notwithstanding—they are not interpreted racially”. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 296; cf. 296–7, 184, 231. Amazingly, Kaufmann claims that Nietzsche in no way prioritizes master morality over slave morality, or “identifies his own position” with either, at 297. A fuller study would need to inventory all of Kaufmann’s omission, elisions, and false representations, and attempt to discern what patterns structure these, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.



*Morals* (cf. BGE §260–272)<sup>20</sup>, as far more minor than almost every other commentator agrees that it was for Nietzsche's last works. Kaufmann asks us to find reassurance that, despite Nietzsche's denigration of modern egalitarian morals as the product of the frustrated impotence of "the powerless":

The distinction between the powerful and the powerless, as here envisaged, is clearly a sociological one—not racial or biological—and it is suggested that being oppressed, which is here considered the equivalent of being powerless, may lead men to mistrust and hate everybody.<sup>21</sup>

As for violence, or anything like a lust for domination, even to dominate the entire "earth" and reinstate rank order (*Ordnung*), on the way to translating the "terrible" text of *homo natura* back into nature (BGE, §230), Kaufmann wants to convince us that the "weak" alone wish for such things.<sup>22</sup> "The strong", led by their philosopher and preoccupied with aesthetic and spiritual pursuits, can afford a benign indifference towards all others.<sup>23</sup> They would never *think* to try to turn their cultural capital into a political claim to superiority and rule, for the sake of securing greater *otium* or achieving the political recognition they feel intrinsically that they deserve: "tyranny over others is not part of Nietzsche's vision".<sup>24</sup> Even war, in this philosopher who announced that his destiny was to herald that "there will be wars, the like of which have never been seen on earth before. Only from my time and after me will Great politics exist on earth"<sup>25</sup>, is something which "the weak" would be responsible for—not Nietzsche's or Zarathustra's "brethren in

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Carol Deathe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), I 7, 1 10. Deathe gives "slaves' revolt" for *der Sklaven-Aufstand*, adding a genitive to the German formulation.

<sup>21</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 184.

<sup>22</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 255–56, 280, 388; cf. 140; 325.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 346: "the sublime indifference felt by those absorbed in the task of self-perfection" which is found in the gospels is aligned here with Nietzsche.

<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 316; cf. 194, 234, 325, 370, esp. 372, 384. But see 194, where Kaufmann quietly glosses over Nietzsche's prescription of "victory" as a medicine for the soul: "medicine, and thus it is dangerous and not to be prescribed generally".

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am a Fatality", 1.

war!”, who nevertheless know that a good war sanctifies any cause.<sup>26</sup> For Kaufmann, when Nietzsche talks of war, he means ethical self-mastery.<sup>27</sup> What this involves is a privatistic task which sounds like it comes from a homily by John Stuart Mill: the pursuit of “self-perfection” (not a word Nietzsche much uses, but we leave that aside).<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche “would like us ... to become autonomous”.<sup>29</sup> And apparently, since no qualification is offered by Kaufmann, this parroting of Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative would have to benevolently aim at everybody—Nietzsche’s sometimes coarse attacks on the “the great Chinaman of Königsberg” (BGE, §210), and egalitarianism and democracy, notwithstanding.

This self-professing anti-Christ’s adherence to the “Biblical heritage”, meanwhile, among other sources (led by a Socrates who we know Nietzsche was in fact sometimes quite critical of), would explain for Kaufmann why his references to *Herrenrassen*, “master/ruling races”, should not be aligned with any later political uses of this term.<sup>30</sup> As for Nietzsche’s adherence to the quasi-physiological languages of “race”, “breeding”, and “blood” of his time, for Kaufmann, it needs to be stressed that these terms are not solely “biologistic”, in the antipolitical philosopher. They embrace a “spiritual” dimension<sup>31</sup>—as if this were a decisive difference, and European antisemitism, including that of Hitler, Rosenberg et al. was ever reducible to its biologistic rationalizations.<sup>32</sup> For Kaufmann, Nietzsche’s excursions into eugenic territory show only the philosopher’s debts to Plato, not to “Nietzsche’s predecessors” of the

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<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translate by T. Common (Edinburgh & London: TN Foulis, 1914), I X, “War and Warriors”.

<sup>27</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 220, 290, 316, 367, 371.

<sup>28</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 252, 256, 270–71, 322, 346, 360.

<sup>29</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 297.

<sup>30</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 287. Kaufmann will talk of a “Socratic Protestantism” as describing Nietzsche (at page 417), in a way which the latter would have arguably *profoundly abhorred*, given his assessments of Socrates and Luther’s role in the history of the egalitarian culture of Europe.

<sup>31</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 304–306, 326.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Losurdo, *Nietzsche*, Chapter 10 (“New Party of Life: Eugenics and ‘Annihilation of Millions of the Deformed’”), chapter 23 (“Social Darwinism, Eugenics and Colonial Massacres”), with chapter 27 (“Transformations of Aryan Mythology, Condemnation of the Revolutionary Conspiracy and the Formation of Antisemitism”).

later nineteenth century aristocratic reaction, and its selective embrace of forms of social Darwinism.<sup>33</sup>

It is probably time that a critic closely assessed the basic accuracy of many of Kaufmann's claims—and the same will apply to Deleuze's celebrated book<sup>34</sup>—with recourse to Nietzsche's own texts. Kaufmann wants to convince us that he finds an antipolitical philosopher in Nietzsche. And students who do not take (or have) the time to systematically read the texts he is referring to have been overwhelmingly of one voice in accepting this benign, only *culturally* elitist vision of the German philosopher of the Second Reich. If we look at *BGE*, which as we've said and have begun to show is a clearly political text—and we should always remember that one entire Part is on "Peoples and Fatherlands", putting aside the culmination in "What is Noble?"—we see that Kaufmann almost entirely avoids reference to any of the troubling fragments we have examined from *BGE*. Kaufmann's references to this fiery text (in sequence, to *BGE* §52, §225, §256, §244, §227, §204, §46, §39, §11, §34, §39, §208, §209, and §225) without fail do not address what the philosopher himself tells us in §251 is "my *serious topic*, the 'European problem', as I understand it, the breeding (*Züchtung*) of a new ruling caste for Europe". When Kaufmann cites from §208, which is a political section, it is to present Nietzsche as a peace-loving individual who wants a unified Europe to combat Russia—and perhaps Kaufmann's cold war context flashes into the frame here. But here is the immediate sequel, which Kaufmann 'for some reason' omits, but which completely contravenes his image of the German philosopher:

Perhaps not only Indian wars and complications in Asia would be necessary to free Europe from its greatest danger [Russia], but also internal subversion, the shattering of the empire into small states, and above all the introduction of parliamentary imbecility [in Russia], together with the obligation of every one to read his newspaper at breakfast I do not say this as one who desires it, in my heart I should rather prefer the contrary—I mean such an increase in the threatening attitude of Russia, that Europe

<sup>33</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 304–5.

<sup>34</sup> Giles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translated by H. Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2002 [originally published, 1962]).

would have to make up its mind to become equally threatening—namely, *to acquire one will*, by means of a new caste to rule over the Continent, a persistent, dreadful will of its own, that can set its aims thousands of years ahead; so that the long spun-out comedy of its petty-statism, and its dynastic as well as its democratic many-willed-ness, might finally be brought to a close. The time for petty politics is past; the next century will bring the struggle for the dominion of the world—the *compulsion* to great politics. (BGE §208)

Let us say it. The idea of Nietzsche as antipolitical is ridiculous. It is unable to be sustained by any reasonably attentive reading of the philosopher, certainly of any of his works after 1882, and by the same token *able* to be sustained only by wholesale excising of entire strata of his texts. The fact that this kind of reading of Nietzsche has prevailed for so long in so many quarters is a curiosity of the second half of twentieth century's academic life which needs to be comprehended and overcome. One cannot blame students for this phenomenon, faced with a thinker as Protean and erudite as Nietzsche. So much of his commentary concerns cultural, political, philosophical and historical contents most won't have encountered before being presented with the German philosopher. The temptation to pass over "irrelevant" (for them, truly) essentializing deliberations on "the French", "the Germans", "the British", "the Jews", "master races", or Wagner, Italian opera, Euripides, Cesare Borgia, etc., is one we can hardly blame these young people for falling prey to. But what is left are those parts of the text which "speak to them": and, very often, philosophy and arts students are broadly apolitical young people seeking self-actualization. It is a natural mistake for them, prodded by the sanctioned authorities of Kaufmann, Deleuze, and many others, to assume that "their Nietzsche", which results from these many excisions, is "the real Nietzsche". But it is a serious hermeneutic mistake.

Moreover, it is natural that most students raised in liberal, democratic, or socialist nations will find almost unbelievable Nietzsche's disquisitions on philosophers as "Caesarian trainer[s] and dictator[s] of civilization" (BGE §207), breeding populations through the use of noble lies, reinstating an order of rank, and taking aim at the creation of superior

beings with a forward view ranging “thousands of years”. Once the sheen of established authority is removed from them, many of these declarations read as almost self-parodic, in their grandiosity and the rage they express at the modern world. But let us be Nietzschean about things. This is because we, most of us, have been raised in a democratic age. We feel very deeply that human dignity is universal, a politics that would embrace violence and eugenics is absolutely immoral, and that philosophy is indeed a trans-political search for wisdom and self-improvement, including in how we relate to others. As Nietzsche would warn us, we need when reading him to beware of projecting our own lenses onto the self-proclaimed “dynamite” who authored *Beyond Good and Evil* and contemporary texts.

## Metapolitical, not Antipolitical: *BGE* and Its Anti-Democratic Task

The best that can be said for any idea of Nietzsche as “antipolitical”, if this is taken to imply an absence of any interest in government and rule, is that Nietzsche comes to politics as we usually experience it from outside and above: “from above downward!” (BGE §30; cf. §265, §286). Of course, Nietzsche has nothing but contempt for modern democratic politics (cf. BGE §269)<sup>35</sup>, which looks to the people as collectively sovereign, and whose vicissitudes turn upon the ability of rulers to serve the public weal as interpreted by the herd.<sup>36</sup> He thinks that modern democracy is the secularized successor of Christian ideas about equality before god, a lineage whose most contemptible and dangerous form is socialism and the “socialist fools” (BGE §21, §202, §203). Democracy inherits the weakening of the European peoples which comes from not breeding out the weak, and cultivating the “self-contempt” he espies behind appeals to fellow feeling which has led to the “overshadowing

<sup>35</sup> On the “great contempt” of Zarathustra’s addressees, which is not to be confused with resentment, which is coded negatively, see *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “Preface”, 3, 5.

<sup>36</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human-all-too-Human*, translated by A. Harvey (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr et al., 1908), I 472.

and uglifying of Europe” (§222). As we’ve seen, the “democratic movement” for him is “not only a form of decay of political organization but a form of decay, namely the diminution, of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value” (§203).

Nevertheless—and although the term “democracy” and derivatives is used some 169 times in Nietzsche’s *oeuvre*<sup>37</sup>—as Paul von Tongeren has identified, one searches in vain for much detailed commentary on political structures involved in that “parliamentary imbecility” he thinks so badly of as to suggest using it as an export to weaken the fearsome Russians (§208). An unpublished note tells us that:

Monarchy *represents* the belief in someone who is completely superior, a leader, savior, demigod. *Aristocracy* represents the belief in an elite humanity and a higher caste. Democracy represents the *disbelief* in great human beings and an elite society: ‘everyone is equal to everyone else’. ‘Finally we are all cattle and rabble, bent on self-interest’.<sup>38</sup>

As van Tongeren analyzes, this text is “symptomatic” in several ways.<sup>39</sup> First, it presents “democracy” in an aristocratic light. Democracy is a wholly negative phenomenon starting from “disbelief (*unglauben*)” in the possibility of higher human beings which monarchical and aristocratic systems affirm. This stress on “belief” points to a second, the key feature of how Nietzsche comes to these subjects:

politics is for Nietzsche only of interest in the framework of, or as a[n] instrument for, or a pointer towards something else: the creation or emergence of a particular type of people and culture.<sup>40</sup>

Nietzsche views politics in the light of this metapolitical, *not* antipolitical end. One might call it “cultural”, distinguishing this sharply from

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<sup>37</sup> Paul van Tongeren, “Nietzsche, Democracy and Transcendence”, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2007): 79.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche (KSA 11, 224), as cited by van Tongeren, “Nietzsche, Democracy and Transcendence”, 79.

<sup>39</sup> van Tongeren, “Nietzsche, Democracy and Transcendence”, 79–80.

<sup>40</sup> van Tongeren, “Nietzsche, Democracy and Transcendence”, 79.

“political” concerns. The problem is that Nietzsche very clearly does not so distinguish things. Here is Van Tongeren again, incisively:

more important than the elaboration of democracy as a political structure, is for Nietzsche the diagnostic treatment of democracy as a symptom of a much broader cultural movement, which he calls ‘Europe’s *democratic movement*’ (BGE, §242). This *cultural* meaning of ‘democracy’ is prevalent in the writings after *Human All Too Human* and almost all of his negative utterances on democracy use the word in this sense. The political democratic ideology is only one symptom of this much broader cultural movement, the founders of which he mentions to be ‘Socrates[,] Christ[,] Luther[,] Rousseau’ (... KSA 12, 348); apart from the last one, he does not refer to any politicians or political theorists. The qualifying roots of this movement are the idea of the equality of all human beings and the morality of pity. The idea of equality was introduced first with Socrates’ dialectics and the dominion of logic that it founded, and then again reinforced by the Christian idea of human beings as created after the image of God and as equal before God. This idea was repeated and underlined by Luther in his opposition to the hierarchy of the church, and then finally translated into secular terms by Rousseau. The morality of pity was also introduced by Christianity; it is—according to Nietzsche—a symptom of the incapacity to affirm suffering as a necessary element of life and as such it signals a weak or powerless form of life. We may conclude that, as a concept for a constitution, ‘democracy’ is the political translation of an ideology which is much older and broader ...<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, modern parliamentary “imbecility” (BGE §208) is for Nietzsche just one consequence or symptom of a much wider malaise. This is a triumph of democratic values which he sees writ large nearly everywhere in the present age:

Indeed, with the help of a religion which indulged and flattered the most sublime herd-animal desires, we have reached the point where we find *even in political and social institutions* an ever more visible expression of this morality: the democratic movement is the heir of the Christian movement. (BGE, §202 [our italics])

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<sup>41</sup> van Tongeren, “Nietzsche, Democracy and Transcendence”, 80.

One could even follow Domenico Losurdo to argue that Nietzsche's philosophy enacts an extraordinary expansion of "politics".<sup>42</sup> For, as we saw, he sees "egalitarianism" as shaping even the nineteenth-century natural sciences (BGE §22 & 1 above). *BGE* Part VI is dedicated to reasserting the primacy of philosophy as a ruling exercise of value-creating will to power, precisely over a situation in which the sciences have become independent, fostering modes of self-effacing, objective, patient inquiry as principal epistemic virtues (§§206–7).<sup>43</sup> It does not surprise us to read in the opening section of "We Scholars" that, if Nietzsche is hostile to the sciences, this is not on epistemological grounds. It is a matter of metapolitical, anti-democratic reasons:

The declaration of independence of the scientific man, his emancipation from philosophy, is one of the subtler after-effects of democratic organization and disorganization .... Here also the instinct of the populace cries, 'Freedom from all masters!' and after science has, with the happiest results, resisted theology, whose 'hand-maid' it had been too long, it now proposes in its wantonness and indiscretion to lay down laws for philosophy, and in its turn to play the 'master'—what am I saying!—to play the philosopher on its own account. (*BGE*, §204 [italics ours])

Indeed, readers know that, if Nietzsche opposes Wagner, it will be publicly on account of his turn towards egalitarian Christianity and his accommodation with the massifying Germany of the Second Reich, in which even education is being democratized.<sup>44</sup> In *Gay Science*, Nietzsche goes so far as to identify a modern "contempt for melody" which would hail from "democratic bad manners and an after-effect of the [French] revolution".<sup>45</sup> As van Tongeren notes, there is nearly no area of modern

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<sup>42</sup> Losurdo, *Nietzsche*, 807–60.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Genealogy of morals* II, 12; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, translated by M. Ludovici (Edinburgh & London: Foulis, 1911), "What the Germans Lack", §6.

<sup>44</sup> On Wagner's alleged, decadent proclivities even for French socialism, see *BGE*, §256, but more widely, for his Christianity, §251, §254, and §47 (a "religious neurosis"). On the spread of education in the Second Reich, see *Twilight of the Idols*, "What the Germans Lack", §4, §6. See Losurdo, *Nietzsche*, 191–200.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, translated by Thomas Common et al. (Edinburgh & London: Foulis, 1910), §103.



life that this philosopher *totus politicus* does not know how to read as a product of the baleful democratic values which prevail: in “disrespectfulness for old age” and excessive celebration of youth (§239), and—least—in promoting *contra naturam* the freedom and equality of women (§§232–239).

As we might schematize, for the later Nietzsche, both the goal (higher men, perhaps the Overman, with all of the wonders they will be freed to produce), and the entire *scope* of “great politics” far exceed the petty considerations and machinations of we democrats of the modern age. As the goal is metapolitical, in a way which—with suitable textual excisions performed—allows Kaufmann, and after Kaufmann many others, to suppose an “antipolitical” philosopher; so many of the subjects on which Nietzsche casts his politicizing gaze are subjects that we are not accustomed to read “politically”. Indeed, in the case of art and the sciences, the modern age has even seen the relative independence of these pursuits celebrated in the name of “progress”, another word that Nietzsche pours bitter scorn upon (BGE §52, §201, §239, §242).

So, to return to our beginning: once the metapolitical dimensions of Nietzsche’s later philosophizing are recognized—dimensions which motivate his most bathetic claims to “responsibility” for epochal wars, and the fate of future millennia—how does *BGE* look?

The task of the text is what he tells us: “my *serious topic*, the ‘European problem’, as I understand it, the breeding [*die Züchtung*] of a new ruling caste for Europe” (BGE, §251).<sup>46</sup> This task intersects with the metapolitical aim of reclaiming, within the cultural sphere, the ascendancy of philosophy from the sciences, since “the famous modern ‘objectivity’—is bad taste, is ignoble *par excellence*”.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, with this being the link to what some today call “the political”—philosophers should “rule (*herrschen*)”, and with an exclamation mark (BGE, §204). We know, in fact, that the relative independence of the sciences is the product of their “democratic” pre-shaping, so it makes sense that a new aristocratic order will also reinstate philosophy to a position of cultural dominion.

<sup>46</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, translated by AM Ludovici (Edinburgh & London: T.N. Foulis, 1911), §57.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “What the Germans Lack”, 6.

Nietzsche's "Platonic" renovation here will be to suggest that this aristocratic project requires *political* rule by philosophers, who are aware of the magnitude of the task which faces them, having been taught by their instructor to identify the source of the egalitarian malady as far back as the prophets of the Old Testament, Socratic dialectic, and the early Church (BGE, §195).<sup>48</sup>

The book must therefore start within the modern "cave", to evoke the *Republic*: that is where the readers are. It is a question of using psychology to allegedly demystify the many alleged mystifications of philosophers since Plato, up to and including in the modern sciences, as we have seen. Part II, so unique in philosophical literature, addresses *whom the desired addressees of the book* are. Not just anyone who might pick the book up, they are free spirits: outsiders in a democratic, leveling age, who can nevertheless be summonsed to conceive and work towards "philosophers of the future":

Need I say expressly after all this that they will be free, *very* free spirits, these philosophers of the future—as certainly also they will not be

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §24, §§41–43, §47; *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates", esp. §§5–7. On the slave revolt and its origins, *Genealogy of Morals* I, 7: "The history of mankind would be far too stupid a thing if it had not had the intellect [*Geist*] of the powerless injected into it:—let us take the best example straight away. Nothing that has been done on earth against 'the noble', 'the mighty', 'the masters' and 'the rulers', is worth mentioning compared with what the Jews have done against them: the Jews, that priestly people, which in the last resort was able to gain satisfaction from its enemies and conquerors only through a radical revaluation of their values, that is, through an act of the most deliberate revenge [*durch einen Akt der geistigsten Rache*]. Only this was fitting for a priestly people with the most entrenched priestly vengefulness. It was the Jews who, rejecting the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed) ventured, with awe-inspiring consistency, to bring about a reversal and held it in the teeth of the most unfathomable hatred (the hatred of the powerless), saying: 'Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly, are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone, whereas you rich, the noble and powerful, you are eternally wicked, cruel, lustful, insatiate, godless, you will also be eternally wretched, cursed and damned!'... We know who became heir to this Jewish revaluation... With regard to the huge and incalculably disastrous initiative taken by the Jews with this most fundamental of all declarations of war, I recall the words I wrote on another occasion (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 195)—namely, that the slaves' revolt in morality begins with the Jews: a revolt which has two thousand years of history behind it and which has only been lost sight of because—it was victorious ..." On "Jewish hatred", see GM I, 8.

merely free spirits, but something more, higher, greater, and fundamentally different, which does not wish to be misunderstood and mistaken? But while I say this, I feel under *obligation* almost as much to them as to ourselves (we free spirits who are their heralds and forerunners), to sweep away from ourselves altogether a stupid old prejudice and misunderstanding... (BGE, §44)

The subtitle of the book, a “Prelude to the Philosophy of the Future” needs to be read with reference to its specific invocation here (BGE §44): this is a prolegomena to any future philosophy, and philosophers, of the kind Nietzsche will intimate and then announce in §30, §40, §§61–62, §204, §§210–12, and §§292–95. Nietzsche is what Leo Strauss amazingly supposed Machiavelli to be: a general without an army, who wants to use his books to create a following for a task he lays down, for them, as a philosopher-legislator or their herald.<sup>49</sup> After the intervening aphorisms of Part IV, the central Part on “The Natural History of Morals” takes us outside the cave of post-Platonic, post-Christian, democratic culture. It is here indeed that democracy is explicitly raised in order to be criticized as the fullest expression so far of the “degradation” produced by Christian egalitarianism, which preserves and even valorizes the suffering and the weak (BGE §§61–62), in “*a crime against life*”.<sup>50</sup> After this anti-modern, anti-democratic relief, which closes with Nietzsche’s invocation of a new “mission (*Aufgabe*)” for those able to see the democratic “brutalizing of man into a pigmy with equal rights” for what it is (BGE §203), Nietzsche can descend again to address how the new philosophy might transform the cities of decadent Europe. Now his Parts’ titles use first person pronouns, first ironically, “We Scholars”, in which the full metapolitical scope of his vision of philosopher-rulers is laid out (esp. BGE §§210–13), and then “Our Virtues”—in which, as in the culminating “What is Noble?”, the putative virtues, even “the duty” (BGE §226) of Nietzsche’s addressees are contrasted with the “slave morality” presently regnant (BGE §195, §260) amongst the “hybrid European—a tolerably ugly plebeian, taken all in all” (BGE §223). It makes full sense, given this political aim, and this “down-going” of the second half

<sup>49</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §47.

of BGE, that Part VIII<sup>51</sup> should ruminate from high on the different characteristics and potentials, for this project, of the “Peoples and Fatherlands” of modern Europe, and that the author’s homeland is given most attention (in all of BGE §240, §§244–48, §§251–56).<sup>51</sup> It is noticeable that in the second, more directly political half of the text, Nietzsche also presents what might be called his only “good word” for modern democracy. What is at stake is that the democratic degradation of most citizens into slave types may mean that democracy is creating the conditions for its own demise:

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<sup>51</sup> Lest this essay become diverted by the debate on Nietzsche and antisemitism, let us note that the Jews are praised as a culture-creating people in §248 (this is the only section in the sequence Kaufmann cites), they are treated both positively and critically in §249 as a source of “many things, good and bad”, up to the very worst and best; whereas §251 is the least comforting. Nietzsche tells us that opposition to antisemitism, which every German he knows evinces, “this prudence and policy is not perhaps directed against the nature of the sentiment itself [anti-semitism] as against its excess but only against its dangerous excess, and especially against the distasteful and infamous expression of this excess of sentiment—on this point we must not deceive ourselves”. After this opening, in which only the excess of anti-semitism and its manner of expression is decried, the philosopher continues: “That Germany has amply *sufficient* Jews, that the German stomach, the German blood, has difficulty (and will long have difficulty) in disposing only of this quantity of ‘Jew’—as the Italian, the Frenchman, and the Englishman have done by means of a stronger digestion:—that is the unmistakable declaration and language of a general instinct, to which one must listen and according to which one must act. ‘Let no more Jews come in! And shut the doors, especially towards the East (also towards Austria!)’—thus commands the instinct of a people whose nature is still feeble and uncertain, so that it could be easily wiped out, easily extinguished, by a stronger race”. Here, the Jews are designated as a strong race, and the Germans, feeble, are positioned as potentially existentially threatened, should more Jewish immigration occur. But this same strength in the Jews, as a race and “nation” that has survived so many centuries, means that a thinker like Nietzsche “who has the future of Europe at heart, will, in all his perspectives concerning the future, calculate upon the Jews, as he will calculate upon the Russians, as above all the surest and likeliest factors in the great play and battle of forces”. Next, we get a eugenic suggestion, that “one should make advances with all prudence, and with selection, pretty much as the English nobility do. It stands to reason that the more powerful and strongly marked types of new Germanism could enter into relation with the Jews with the least hesitation, for instance, the nobleman officer from the Prussian border. It would be interesting in many ways to see whether the genius for money and patience (and especially some intellect and intellectuality—sadly lacking in the place referred to) could not in addition be added and bred (*hinzuthun, hinzuzüchten liesse*) to the hereditary art of commanding and obeying ...” through such a mix, presumably orchestrated by philosophers-leaders of the future. On the complex question of Nietzsche and antisemitism, see Robert Holub, *Nietzsche and the Nineteenth Century: Social Questions and Philosophical Interventions* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2018), “Chapter 6: The Jewish Question”; and Losurdo, *Nietzsche*, Chapters 3, 5, and 27; Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodern Nietzscheanism*, 105–120.

The same new conditions under which on an average a leveling and mediocrizing of man will take place—a useful, industrious, variously serviceable, and clever gregarious man—are in the highest degree suitable to give rise to exceptional men of the most dangerous and attractive qualities. For, while the capacity for adaptation, which is every day trying changing conditions, and begins a new work with every generation, almost with every decade, makes the *powerfulness* of the type impossible; while the collective impression of such future Europeans will probably be that of numerous, talkative, weak-willed, and very handy workmen who *require* a master, a commander, as they require their daily bread; while, therefore, the democratizing of Europe will tend to the production of a type prepared for *slavery* in the most subtle sense of the term: the *strong* man will necessarily in individual and exceptional cases, become stronger and richer than he has perhaps ever been before—owing to the unprejudicedness of his schooling, owing to the immense variety of practice, art, and disguise. I meant to say that the democratizing of Europe is at the same time an involuntary arrangement for the breeding of *tyrants*—taking the word in all its meanings, even in its most spiritual sense. (BGE §242)

It is appropriate that this chapter on the metapolitical critique of democracy in *Beyond Good and Evil* closes by stressing how unprecedented in the history of Western philosophy is a figure valorizing this term “tyranny”, and supposing it has a “spiritual” sense. Its classical meaning, political, is of rule beyond law, beyond moral limitation, by an autocrat, over all others, who are deprived of all rights, and potentially subject to any will, caprice, or violence from the leader. Once again, the term “tyranny” is metapolitically stretched by Nietzsche, like the term and ideas of “democracy” to which it is stridently counterposed. It can’t surprise us any longer that philosophy itself, for Nietzsche, is characterized as “this tyrannical impulse itself, the most spiritual Will to Power, the will to ‘creation of the world’, the will to the *causa prima*” (BGE §9), as well as a spiritualized form of cruelty (BGE §44, §210, §214, esp. §§229–230). But so is ethical self-transformation—less a form of medicining, curing, cultivating, or training of the soul, than a protracted “tyranny” or “tyrannizing” over oneself (BGE §9, §188); the development of rhetorical style in language is “the tyranny of rhyme and rhythm”

(BGE §188), the artistic seizing of the propitious moment is “tyrannical” (BGE §274); even nature herself, as we saw from the start, would be for our philosopher “the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of the claims of power” (BGE §22). And of course, democrats and “slaves” are also accused by the philosophical lover of tyranny of being secretly tyrannical, beneath their patter about freedom and equality, “for the slave desires the unconditioned, he understands nothing but the tyrannous, even in morals, he loves as he hates, without *nuance*, to the very depths, to the point of pain, to the point of sickness—” (BGE §46).

Applying Nietzsche once more to himself, and reading every philosophical text as an involuntary confession by its author (BGE §6), shouldn't we have long been asking who Nietzsche was describing here, without the least irony?

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# “Unhappy the Land Where Heroes Are Needed”: Nietzsche’s Overman in Dark Times

Nancy S. Love

Andrea: “Unhappy the land that has no heroes”

Galileo: “No. Unhappy the land where heroes are needed.”<sup>1</sup>

—Berthold Brecht

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<sup>1</sup> Berthold Brecht, *A Life of Galileo*, trans. Mark Ravenhill (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), scene 13.

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## Nietzsche Redux

In 2017, Richard Spencer, philosophical architect of the alt-right, remarked, “You could say I was red-pilled by Nietzsche.”<sup>2</sup> The term “red-pilled” comes from *The Matrix* and, according to Hugo Drochon, “in Alt-Right speak, to be ‘red-pilled’ is to have a sort of awakening from the lies one has been living under to see a new reality: the scales have been lifted from one’s eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Spencer praises Nietzsche for his critiques of slave morality (Christianity, democracy, and socialism), his defense of aristocratic values, and his embrace of heroic men, such as Napoleon and Wagner.<sup>4</sup> The recent Nietzsche resurgence reaches well beyond the American alt-right and Spencer, however. In *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, Ronald Beiner discusses Nietzsche’s wider influence on far-right intellectuals, including Alain de Benoist (France), Aleksandr Dugin (Russia) and Julius Evola (Italy).<sup>5</sup> In recent decades, Nietzsche’s return has also reached ordinary citizens, such as diehard fans of the 1970s British racist skinhead band, Skrewdriver, whose lead song, “Hail the New Dawn,” recalls Nietzsche’s *Morgenrothe* or *Daybreak*. In 2017, the alt-right’s Identity Europa dropped banners on US college and university campuses that still proudly proclaimed, “A New Dawn is Breaking. Rise and Get Active.”<sup>6</sup> As Sean Illing has put it, “It would appear that ‘bad Nietzsche’ is back, and he looks a lot like he did in the earliest twentieth century when his ideas were unjustly appropriated by the (original) Nazis.”<sup>7</sup> This latest reemergence has occurred despite numerous attempts to sanitize Nietzsche, most famously by the

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<sup>2</sup> Sean Illing, “The Alt Right Is Drunk on Bad Readings of Nietzsche. The Nazis Were Too,” *Vox*, August 17, 2017, updated December 30, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo Drochon, “Nietzsche and the Alt-Right,” *The Philosopher* 107, no. 2 (Spring 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Josh Harkinson, “Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power, Alt-Right Architect Richard Spencer Aims to Make Racism Cool Again,” *Mother Jones*, October 27, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See my “Back to the Future: Trendy Fascism, the Trump Effect, and the Alt-Right,” *New Political Science: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 39, no. 2 (April 2017), 263–268.

<sup>7</sup> Illing, “The Alt Right.”

post-World War II philosopher, Walter Kaufmann.<sup>8</sup> Illing concludes that Nietzsche regrettably serves as a mirror: “In the end, people find in Nietzsche’s work what they went into it already believing. Which is why the alt-right, animated as they are by rage and discontent, find in Nietzsche a mirror of their own resentments.”<sup>9</sup>

There are even newer right Nietzschean currents to explore today, though. In 2019, the alt-right rebranded itself as the American Identity Movement, a move meant to create some distance from Trump. While some radical right activists at the 2021 National Conservative Conference (NatCon) still discussed being “red-pilled” by Nietzsche and yearned like Spencer for aristocratic values, others claimed instead to be “black-pilled.” According to MAGA supporter, Amanda Milius, “black-pilled” is “a very online term used to describe people who think that our world is so messed up that nothing can save it now.”<sup>10</sup> These newer “black-pilled” Nietzscheans evoke the more nihilistic, pessimistic Nietzsche who anticipated and reviled the last man, a herd animal devoid of creativity who seeks only comfort. Once humanity embraces the last man, Nietzsche argues, the social conditions necessary for the emergence of the overman rapidly recede. Only a few active nihilists who remain can sustain any hope for a future aristocracy.<sup>11</sup> At the end of his Nietzsche podcast, Spencer offers right Nietzscheans this lingering hope that Nietzsche’s day has not yet come.<sup>12</sup>

The recent Nietzsche redux is not limited to the radical right. Nietzsche has also found new adherents on the political left, especially among those influenced by postmodernism. Derridean deconstruction, Deleuzian affirmation, and Foucauldian genealogy, are influenced by

<sup>8</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

<sup>9</sup> Illing, “The Alt Right.”

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in James Pogue, “Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel Is Placing His Biggest Bets,” *Vanity Fair*, April 20, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Bull, “Nietzsche’s Negative Ecologies,” in *Nietzsche’s Negative Ecologies*, eds. Malcolm Bull, Anthony J. Cascardi, T.J. Clark (Berkeley: The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009), 50–78.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Bowden (transcript) and Richard Spencer (podcast), “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche,” *Counter-Currents*, April 15, 2016. <https://counter-currents.com/2016/04/the-uses-and-abuses-of-nietzsche/>.

Nietzsche's radical epistemology in which the will to power undergirds and overcomes the will to truth. While Nietzsche's inegalitarianism appeals to the radical right, many left Nietzscheans find the post-identity politics that emerges from his anti-metaphysics attractive.<sup>13</sup> Despite the well-documented challenges of conjuring a democratic Nietzsche,<sup>14</sup> left Nietzscheans also embrace his concept of *ressentiment* to explain popular reactions to injustice. A prominent example is Wendy Brown's critique of "wounded attachments," an identity politics based on the victim statuses that predominate in late capitalist democratic politics. According to Brown, democratic citizens defined by "wounded attachments" can only act politically by invoking the terms of their oppression. The political result, she fears, will not be a real transformation (more on that later), but a mere inversion of oppression, that is, a potentially violent acting out of *ressentiment* by marginalized against dominant groups—poor against rich, black against white, women against men, LGBTQ against Cis-gender—and a pyrrhic victory, at best.<sup>15</sup>

Although Nietzsche's renewed presence across the political spectrum may initially seem puzzling, Babette Babich argues that he anticipated it when he wrote, "*non legor, non legar*," which translates as "I am not read. I will not be read."<sup>16</sup> Or, more tendentiously, "The worst readers are those who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole."<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Bull also argues that readings of Nietzsche tend to mirror the values of the reader. He distinguishes between two types of readers, those oriented to victory, who rightly—or more often, wrongly—identify with the values of Nietzsche's master morality (courage, power, strength)

<sup>13</sup> Guy Elgat, "Why Friedrich Nietzsche Is the Darling of the Far Left and the Far Right," *Tablet Magazine*, May 8, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel: Intellectual Biography and Critical Balance Sheet*, trans. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), Part 3, 383–606.

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). For a more extensive discussion, see my *Trendy Fascism: White Power Music and the Future of Democracy* (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Babette Babich, "Nietzsche: Looking Right, Reading Left," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (November 2020), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Sue Prideaux, "Far Right, Misogynist, Humourless? Why Nietzsche Is so Misunderstood," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2018. Also see her *I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

or those oriented to defeat, who when faced with Nietzsche’s master morality feel ashamed, vulnerable, and weak.<sup>18</sup> While right Nietzscheans clearly remain oriented to victory, as do some left Nietzscheans, many on the left today tend toward defeatism. In his essay, “Where is the anti-Nietzsche?,” Bull writes: “Rather than reading for victory with Nietzsche, or even reading for victory against Nietzsche by identifying with the slave morality, we [losers] read for victory against ourselves, making ourselves the victims of the text.”<sup>19</sup> In this chapter, I argue that these various readings of Nietzsche’s ideas on inequality and *ressentiment* are playing out in partisan politics today. I also suggest that all too often the political figures involved are poor imitations of Nietzsche’s master morality. They are instead ascetic priests masquerading as overmen—or overman wannabes.

## Master/Slave Morality, Equality, and *Ressentiment*<sup>20</sup>

Although master/slave morality is a persistent theme in his writings, Nietzsche provides his most comprehensive analysis of equality and *ressentiment* in the three essays that comprise his *Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>21</sup> Not coincidentally, this is the text that introduced Richard Spencer—and through him, the alt-right—to Nietzsche’s philosophy.<sup>22</sup> In the first essay, Nietzsche describes the structural opposition between master and slave morality and its historical and psychological origins. He distinguishes between the noble type of man, who is self-defining and value-creating,

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<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Bull, “Where Is the Anti-Nietzsche?” in *Nietzsche’s Negative Ecologies*, eds. Malcolm Bull, Anthony J. Cascardi, T.J. Clark (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009), 20–49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Some material in this chapter previously appeared in my “Nietzsche, Adorno, and the Musical Spirit of Ressentiment and Redemption,” in *Nietzsche and Critical Social Theory: Affirmation, Animosity, and Ambiguity*, eds. Christine A. Payne and Michael J. Roberts (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 73–90. [Permissions granted.]

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 437–600.

<sup>22</sup> Graeme Wood, “His Kampf: How Richard Spencer Is a Troll and an Icon for White Supremacists. He Was Also My High-School Classmate,” *The Atlantic*, May 14, 2017.

who actively posits himself as good compared to bad, and the slave, who is a reactive type. The slave psyche begins by defining its opposite—the oppressive master—as evil and the qualities which help slaves survive (humility, industry, patience, pity, etc.) as good. In the famous aphorism #260 of *Beyond Good & Evil*, Nietzsche encapsulates this contrast: “According to slave morality, those who are ‘evil’ thus inspire fear; according to master morality it is precisely those who are ‘good’ that inspire, and wish to inspire, fear, while the ‘bad’ are felt to be contemptible.”<sup>23</sup> Although the slave initially defines an “Other” as the source of “evil,” slave morality is gradually internalized through the psychological processes that Nietzsche associates with the emergence of political subjects.

The second essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* explains the role of master and slave morality in the creation of political subjects. “A conqueror and master race” initially and unconsciously created the state with its laws. In response, “animal” man learned to control and, most important, to internalize his instincts, and became a sovereign individual—calculable, disciplined, and reasonable. Nietzsche says that “In a certain sense, the whole of asceticism belongs here.” But only in a certain sense. He distinguishes the conscience (and the subject) from “that other ‘somber thing,’ the consciousness of guilt, the ‘bad conscience.’”<sup>24</sup> Man’s initial internalization of his instincts provides the basic template for the bad conscience, but its destructive potential is only fully actualized later when ascetic priests take charge. They invent the *bad* conscience, the life-denying internalization of the instincts that typifies the slave type and slave morality; they forge what will become crucial links between subjectivity, slave morality, and *ressentiment*.

These ascetic priests are Nietzsche’s focus in the third essay. They play a critical role in the psychological history of *ressentiment* as he depicts in the following passage: “Its origin has been briefly suggested...as a piece of animal psychology, no more: there we encountered the sense of guilt in its raw state, so to speak. It was only in the hands of the priest, that

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 179–436; #260.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Second Essay, #3–4.

artist in guilt feelings, that it achieved form – oh, what a form, ‘Sin’ – for this the priestly name for the animal’s ‘bad conscience’ (cruelty directed backward) – has been the greatest event so far in the history of the sick soul: we possess in it the most dangerous and fateful artifice of religious interpretation.”<sup>25</sup> Masters externalize their instincts in ways that are life-affirming, but slaves’ internalization of the masters’ created meanings is life-denying. In understanding *ressentiment*, the crucial issue is how— not whether—the instincts are internalized. According to Nietzsche, the creation of the conscience and, with it, subjectivity and morality are not in themselves life-denying. The creation of an inner world makes man “interesting” and “promising”; it gives him the capacity to create consciously and purposefully as Nietzschean “free spirits” do. However, slave morality is merely reactive and hence life-denying; it blames the masters for their capacity to create values, for their life-affirming will to power.

For Nietzsche, the fundamental problem emerges when slave morality begins to dominate human history. Slave moralists use the state and its laws to pursue equality and, as a result promote degeneration of the instincts. Despite their other differences, Nietzsche thinks liberalism with its principle of equal rights among free individuals and socialism with its vision of human emancipation of species-beings exemplify this degenerative tendency of slave morality. Both ideologies construct false equivalences that mask the fundamental inequality of human beings. Nietzsche writes: “Equality of rights could all too easily be changed into equality in violating rights – I mean, into a common war on all that is rare, strange, privileged, the higher man, the higher soul, the higher duty, the higher responsibility, and the abundance of creative power and masterfulness.”<sup>26</sup> Over time those capable of master morality learn to feel guilty over their superiority, because slave moralists deem it evil; the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Third Essay #20.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #212. In this context, it seems important to note that Nietzsche shares Marx’s critique of bourgeois right as a merely formal equality. However, their alternatives are profoundly different. Marx advocates for equity or the principle “from each according to ability, to each according to need.” as an alternative, Nietzsche defends hierarchy, more specifically, “aristocratic radicalism.” See my *Marx, Nietzsche, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

masters begin to deny their instincts for mastery. For Nietzsche, socialism represents this denouement of egalitarianism:

The *over-all degeneration of man* down to what today appears to the socialist dolts and flatheads as their “man of the future”—as their ideal—this degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal (or, as they say, to the man of the “free society”), this animalization of man into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims, is possible, there is no doubt of it.<sup>27</sup>

The ascetic priests of slave morality triumph by not only redirecting the instincts internally, but also misdirecting them against that which affirms life.

Another issue emerges here in the history of master/slave morality, and it has implications for Nietzsche’s psychology of *ressentiment*. Nietzsche regards Christianity and its secular heir, modern science, as ascetic ideals. Both proffer “truths” that support the historical triumph of slave morality.<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche writes: “This pair, science and the ascetic ideal, both rest on the same foundation... on the same overestimation of truth.... Therefore they are necessarily allies, so that if they are to be fought they can only be fought and called into question together.”<sup>29</sup> Christianity affirms the ascetic values of slave morality expressed in the “Sermon on the Mount” as the will of God, a will that takes secular form in liberal democratic and socialist societies. Modern science in its pursuit of truth systematically destroys all horizons, Christian, liberal democratic, and socialist, resulting in relativism followed by nihilism. Both the Christian God and modern science fall prey to the relentless demystification of the world in the pursuit of truth. As successive “horizons” recede, human existence becomes increasingly meaningless until humanity, or, at least, most of it, loses the will to give life meaning.

The will to truth confronts humanity with a terrible choice. As Nietzsche puts it, “Either abolish your reverences or – *yourselves!*’ The latter

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<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #202.

<sup>28</sup> David Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Eva Melnikova, “Nietzsche’s Morality of Ressentiment,” *Filosof* (Fall 2010), 4–13.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Third Essay, #25.

would be nihilism; but would not the former also be—nihilism?—This is *our* question mark.”<sup>30</sup> For Nietzsche, nihilism can take one of two forms: (1) active nihilism is “nihilism as a sign of the increased power of the spirit”; (2) passive nihilism is “nihilism as a sign of the collapse and decline of spiritual strength.”<sup>31</sup> Only the former retains the life-affirming creativity of master morality and, with it, the potential for the overman. The latter leads to the last man, whom Nietzsche describes despairingly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man. ‘What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?’ thus asks the last man, and he blinks.”<sup>32</sup>

To complicate matters further, according to David Owen, Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality actually involves three (not two) social groups: nobles, priests, and slaves. The operative distinction is between those subject to “the morality of custom and the social straight-jacket” (everyone) and those definitively locked in the spell of society and peace (priests and slaves). Whereas the warrior-nobles are able to enjoy some compensations for the requirements of civilization by exercising their instinct for cruelty outside the bounds of society, the same does not apply to priests and slaves. As a result, it is within these latter classes of persons that the instinct for cruelty is turned back on itself, and vents itself on itself.<sup>33</sup>

Nietzsche argues that ascetic priests perform a service by ministering to the slaves’ weak(ened) instincts; they give their suffering meaning, at least temporarily, by attributing blame for it; they assign a doer (oneself or another) as responsible for the deed. Guided by ascetic priests, the slaves’ loss of agency and creativity and their growing sense of powerlessness eventually manifests in a widespread reactive psychology fueled by

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<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), #356.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), #22.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), first part, #5.

<sup>33</sup> Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy*, 105.



*ressentiment*. The ascetic priests cannot allow the slaves' *ressentiment* to become politically explosive, though, or it might jeopardize their leadership. Instead, they manipulate the slaves' *ressentiment*, keeping them angry and fearful of others or consumed by their own self-doubt and guilt, and, in either case, weak and dependent. As Jeremy Engels, sums it up: "The slave morality Nietzsche describes disciplines the herd through the creation of a resentful soul."<sup>34</sup> Engels concludes that "A resentful soul is easily controlled by an artful leader.... Perpetually reacting, the demos cannot act with deliberation or purpose."<sup>35</sup>

In *Ressentiment*, Max Scheler outlines the structural inequality that forms the basis for *ressentiment* and runs through the stages of master/slave morality Nietzsche describes. He writes: "The formal structure of *ressentiment* expression is always the same: A is affirmed, valued, and praised not for its own intrinsic quality, but with the unverbalized intention of denying, devaluating, and denigrating B. A is played off 'against B'."<sup>36</sup> Although Nietzsche presents distinct aspects of master/slave morality in each essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* and suggests a developmental relationship between them, all share the structure Scheler describes. Peter Poellner's comprehensive definition of *ressentiment* illustrates this structural similarity well:

1) *Ressentiment* as Nietzsche presents it...is a psychological condition which has at its core an experience of pain, or discomfort, or frustrated desire. This pain or discomfort...is experienced by the subject of *ressentiment* as caused by other subjects... 2) This interpretation of a "not-self" (GM 1:10) as the cause of one's suffering motivates a negative affective response, resentment in a non-technical, everyday sense—Nietzsche calls it hatred—toward those Others. 3) the original pain and the negative affect towards its presumed cause jointly motivate a desire for mastery or superiority in the subject of *ressentiment*... 4) The final element of the dynamic of *ressentiment* is the subject's hitting upon a new evaluative framework that allows him to remove his pain or discomfort by making

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<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Engels, "The Politics of Resentment and the Tyranny of the Minority: Rethinking Victimhood for Resentful Times," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2010), 303–325, 311.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>36</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. William H. Holdheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 51.

possible either self-affirmation or mental mastery over the external source of pain.<sup>37</sup>

By manipulating the herd with slave moralities, ascetic priests perpetuate *ressentiment* and its causes instead of mobilizing the herd into effective struggles against existing injustices. Ascetic priests are, then, engaged in an ongoing and delicate task. If their herd “ministry” fails, the slaves’ smoldering *ressentiment* over inequality and injustice could explode.

## The Politics of Ascetic Priests: From Trump and Spencer to Yarvin, Vance, and Beyond

Contemporary politics has no shortage of ascetic priests many of them involved in the current Nietzsche resurgence. In political terms, Nietzsche’s ascetic priests may be seen as demagogues who use *ressentiment* to mobilize “the people.” I focus here on right Nietzschean ascetic priests in politics today, but I also briefly consider how leaders on the left minister to their sick herds.

### Trump and Spencer

When Jonathan Bowden claimed on Spencer’s podcast, “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche,” that “any Right that’s got a future will have to partly base itself around Nietzsche’s thinking,” Spencer concurred.<sup>38</sup> Although Donald Trump did not set his sights by Nietzsche (or any philosopher), his right-wing politics clearly resonated more with the alt-right than many traditional conservatives. Hillary Clinton recognized Trump’s break with “Republicanism as we have known it” when she remarked that “an emerging racist ideology known as the alt-right

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Guy Elgat, “How Smart (and Just) Is Ressentiment?” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 247–255, 248.

<sup>38</sup> Bowden and Spencer, “Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche,” April 15, 2016.

controlled his campaign.”<sup>39</sup> As confirmation, consider Spencer’s 2016 tweet to supporters: “Forget the polls. We have a candidate for President who’s demystifying ‘racism’ and the financial power structure.” He added, “No matter what happens, I will be profoundly grateful to Donald Trump for the rest of my life.”<sup>40</sup> As a gesture to traditional conservatives, Spencer also acknowledged that Trump is “compromised by the perversions that define this [American] decadent society.”<sup>41</sup> In his infamous “Hail, Trump” speech, Spencer deployed a Nazi salute that solidified the alt-right alliance with Trump’s white nationalism or, in Spencer’s phrase, a “post-American” white “ethno-state.”<sup>42</sup> Responding to the media firestorm that followed, Spencer reaffirmed the newness of the alt-right: “We don’t allow people to tell us what we can joke about. We don’t play by their rules. We have fun, we can be outlandish, and that is never going to stop....the Alt Right can’t be defined by something from the past.”<sup>43</sup> For Spencer, what defines the alt-right is its identity, that is, the white identity of European and American people.

Spencer was introduced to Nietzsche’s philosophy by reading his *Genealogy of Morals*, and it shapes his understanding of identity as more than race or, more precisely, of race as more than color. For Spencer, racial identity involves what the Germans call *Kultur* or *Volksgeist*: “A race is genetically coherent, a race is something you can study, a race is about genes and DNA, but it’s not just about genes and DNA. The most important thing about it is the people and the spirit. That’s what race is about.”<sup>44</sup> He criticizes traditional conservatives, especially George Bush, for their attempts to define America by abstract—and color-blind—values, the supposedly universal principles of freedom, equality, and democracy. This approach, he argues, reduces America to an economic system and Americans to f/raceless, passive consumer-citizens, members

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Wood, “His Kampf.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Excerpts from the speech are available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o6-bi3jlxk>.

<sup>43</sup> James Edwards (transcript) and Richard Spencer (podcast), “Transcript of Richard Spencer’s Speech at Texas A&M,” December 13, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Wood, “His Kampf”; Spencer, “Speech at Texas A & M.”

of a “homogenous global mass.”<sup>45</sup> Bush, Hillary, Soros, Zuckerberg, and Gates, Spencer argues, “want an undifferentiated global population, raceless, genderless, identityless, meaningless population, consuming sugar, consuming drugs, while watching porn on VR goggles while they max out their credit cards.”<sup>46</sup> This im/moral vision exemplifies what Nietzsche called “passive nihilism,” an “America that is a nihilistic platform for the world.”<sup>47</sup> In response, Spencer implores white people to “have an identity,” and not only white people. The passive nihilism he describes “isn’t just a great erasure of white people. It isn’t just an invasion of Europe, an invasion of the United States by the third world, it is ultimately the destruction of all peoples and all cultures around the globe.”<sup>48</sup> With all of his flaws, Trump represented higher hopes for (white) humanity. Echoing Nietzsche, Spencer says, “he [Trump] had a sense of height, of upward movement, of greatness, of that thing that makes the white race truly unique and truly wonderful, that striving towards infinity, that however vulgar he might be that he had a sense of it.”<sup>49</sup>

Elsewhere, I have argued that Donald Trump is an ascetic priest of authoritarian populism.<sup>50</sup> I claimed that Trump took the “precarity”<sup>51</sup> of middle- and working-class whites, their newly diminished status as culturally and economically dispossessed and redirected it toward white nationalist identity politics. Spencer argues that exhorting white Americans to claim their racial identity, to “Become who you are,” ushers in a new political era. In fact, Trump is only the latest in a long line of political leaders who have invoked “the wages of whiteness”<sup>52</sup> to assuage

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<sup>45</sup> Spencer, “Speech at Texas A & M.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> For a more extensive discussion of Trump’s political “ministry,” specifically, his use of *ressentiment*, see my “The Art of the Deal, The Arts of Democracy: Trump, Dewey, and Democracy,” *Fast Capitalism* 17, no. 1, on which this discussion draws.

<sup>51</sup> Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Bristol, UK: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: The Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007).

what Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb poignantly label “the hidden injuries of class.”<sup>53</sup> By mobilizing “a kind of moral hierarchy of national and cultural differences,” white identity politics attempts to mitigate the internalized sense of many poorer whites that they are “nothing special.”<sup>54</sup> In *The Abolition of White Democracy*, Joel Olson argues that the question “Who *may* be considered white?” has mattered historically, and horribly so.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike Spencer, whose white nationalism affirms the stories of other peoples, Trump’s political “ministry” targets “Others”—immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims, Native Americans, women—as inferior beings and the causes of white, working-class, male Americans’ suffering. Most important from a Nietzschean perspective, Trump invokes the economic language of creditors and debtors to portray the injustices suffered by poor, working-class whites. As we have seen, Nietzsche thinks consciousness was “dearly bought” through cruel punishments for disobedience to social norms. The masterful artists who initially formed man exchanged the creditor’s psychic pleasure in inflicting pain for the debtor’s infractions of the social contract. Punishment draws its power “in the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the idea of ‘legal subjects’ and in turn points back to the fundamental forms of buying, selling, barter, trade, and traffic.”<sup>56</sup> Trump’s calls to “lock her (Hillary) up,” the “birther controversy” (Obama), the moniker “Pocahontas” (Warren), feed his supporters’ sense that “Others” have stolen their power and privilege, and sullied the United States as a white nation. In this exchange economy of contractual agreements between creditors and debtors, Trump supporters become the victims of injustice. Theirs is a righteous cause, to retake the(ir) country, to “Make America Great Again.” As Spencer acknowledges, there is an “opposite embedded in that statement.” Today America is no longer great because, “in my lifetime,

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Second Essay #4.

America has lost an essence. It's lost a people, it's lost a meaning.”<sup>57</sup> White Americans need to be reminded that their ancestors conquered this continent, that they won.

Until January 6, 2021, Trump performed the delicate political tasks of an ascetic priest well; he kept his base smoldering with *ressentiment* over inequality and sufficiently under control to prevent any real demands for change. At this writing, January 6 remains under investigation by Congress, litigation continues in the courts, televised public hearings have begun, and, in an ironic twist, Trump officials are being arrested for refusing Congressional subpoenas.

## Yarvin, Vance, and Beyond

Partly as a result, the American radical right increasingly articulates itself as more than Trump, while also remaining Nietzschean. Consider Amanda Milius's description of NatCon 2021, “What this is...is a new thought movement. So it's very hard to put your finger on and articulate what it is outside of Trumpism. Because it really is separate from the man himself, it has nothing to do with that.”<sup>58</sup> Two new intellectual leaders of this “thought movement” with the potential to displace Trump and Spencer are Curtis Yarvin and J.D. Vance. A self-proclaimed neo-reactionary, Yarvin targets what he calls “the Cathedral,” a nexus of media and academic elites that functions as a largely unrecognized system of bureaucratic control.<sup>59</sup> As he puts it, “‘The cathedral’ is just a short way to say ‘journalism plus academia.’”<sup>60</sup> Despite its democratic claims, “the cathedral” functions as a “single organizational system”; “it has one clear doctrine. It always agrees with itself.”<sup>61</sup> However, it does not operate as a hierarchy like the Church, but rather “as a discourse—not an army of ideas, but a market of ideas.” And, that market always

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<sup>57</sup> Spencer, “Speech at Texas A & M.”

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Pogue, “Inside the New Right.”

<sup>59</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “A Brief Explanation of the Cathedral: An Oligarchy Inherently Converges on Ideas That Justify the Use of Power,” *Gray Mirror*, January 21, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

selects for “an idea that validates the use of power.”<sup>62</sup> In this way, the Cathedral with its myriad expert advisors governs public opinion and public policy. To put it another way, government “leaks power” to the Cathedral, because bureaucracy “inherently wants to outsource responsibility to outside actors.” It seeks to determine policies through standard operating procedures rather than individual decisions.<sup>63</sup>

Yarvin argues for another form of government, “the form that doesn’t leak power”—“a monarchy.” Aware of the authoritarian connotations of “dictator,” he clarifies, “If you’re going to have a monarchy, it has to be a monarchy of everyone.”<sup>64</sup> In his parable of Mutoxia, he proposes using “the power of democracy—which is irresistible but unstable to depose their old oligarchy and install a new monarchy.” He concludes, “This is the right way to use democracy—one political force which is never an *end*, but always a *means*.”<sup>65</sup> In his defense of monarchy, Yarvin was influenced by Bronze Age Pervert, his self-proclaimed cut-out/cell in the Trump White House, and the pseudonymous author of *Bronze Age Mindset*.<sup>66</sup> Bronze Age Pervert called for the return of Nietzsche’s superman mindset to modern politics, saying “inside every noble Greek was an unquenchable lust for power, and this means power to become lord over life and death in your state.”<sup>67</sup> Bronze Age Pervert offers bold examples: “In Archaic Greece, in Renaissance Italy, in the vast expanse of the heroic Old Stone Age, at the middle of the Bronze Age of High Chariotry, lived men of power and magnificence in great numbers.”<sup>68</sup> Yarvin’s exemplars are more tepid: the Roman republic under Caesar or the Stuart monarchy before the Glorious Revolution.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Pogue, “Inside the New Right.”

<sup>65</sup> Yarvin, “The Cathedral.”

<sup>66</sup> Bronze Age Pervert, *Bronze Age Mindset* (self-published, 2018). Bronze Age Pervert refers to Yarvin’s “The Cathedral” as the “Iron Prison” (a possible reference to Weber) and to Nietzsche’s “last men” as “bug men.” The Nietzschean influences are unmistakable and include the author’s aphoristic style.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., #55.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., #49.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Pogue, “Inside the New Right.”

In his NatCon’21 speech, “The Universities Are the Enemy,” J.D. Vance offers a closely related critique of the dominant discourse.<sup>70</sup> Using examples of climate change, anti-racism, and Covid-19 policy, he argues that “universities do not pursue knowledge and truth, they pursue deceit and lies.”<sup>71</sup> They are “full of people who have a structural, self-serving, and financial interest in coloring American culture as racist and evil.”<sup>72</sup> Regarding “critical race theory,” he claims that “universities tell us that so long as we’re trailblazing on diversity equity inclusion, it doesn’t matter if normal people get screwed; all that matters is progressive orthodoxy and whether our society reinforces it.”<sup>73</sup> Vance, who has since won the Republican nomination for Senate in Ohio with Trump’s endorsement, says he “looked for an inspirational quote to end his speech from the Bible or a great hero of western civilization or a great American leader.” He ultimately chose a quote from “the great prophet and statesman, Richard Milhous Nixon”: “the professors are the enemy.”<sup>74</sup> If the monarch of Yarvin and Bronze Age Pervert reinvokes a Nietzschean “vitalism,” Vance’s call for a “great hero” seems more like political opportunism. Roger Sollenberger notes that when “J.D. Vance Deleted His Anti-Trump Tweets. He Forgot His ‘Likes,’” many of them were negative toward Trump.<sup>75</sup> Rachel Haywire argues that Bronze Age Pervert’s discussion of Nietzsche’s superman “could be interpreted as more self-help corporatism rather than Zarathustra.”<sup>76</sup>

On how to realize his alternative of a great leader, Vance says “I tend to think that we should seize the institutions of the left...And turn them against the left.”<sup>77</sup> One such strategy is Yarvin’s RAGE, an acronym for Remove All Government Employees, which may remind some readers of the January 6 Insurrection. However, others on the radical right seek

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<sup>70</sup> J.D. Vance, “The Universities Are the Enemy,” November 10, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Vance also praises Pat Buchanan.

<sup>75</sup> Roger Sollenberger, “J.D. Vance Deleted His Anti-Trump Tweets. He Forgot His ‘Likes,’” *The Daily Beast*, July 27, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Rachel Haywire, “Who Owns Vitalism?” *The American Mind*, April 5, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Pogue, “Inside the New Right.”



to replace the ideology machine of “the Cathedral” with a more laissez-faire individualism. Of this strategy, Milius says, “I get the feeling, and I could be wrong...that the right actually at this point is like almost in this live-and-let-live place where the left used to be at.”<sup>78</sup> She elaborates: “[It’s] the idea that you can’t raise your kids in a traditional, somewhat religious household without having them educated at school that their parents are Nazis.”<sup>79</sup>

## From Right to Left Nietzscheans (and Back Again)

Following Trump’s 2016 campaign, Rev. Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite cautioned Americans about the effects of political polarization: “When you mirror your enemy, you become your enemy.”<sup>80</sup> Milius’ previous comment reflects such an ironic reversal among Right Nietzscheans, who now in some respects mirror liberal multiculturalism. Yet Right Nietzscheans are simultaneously critical of Left Nietzschean politics today. On Spencer’s Nietzsche podcast that I mentioned earlier, Jonathan Bowden notes that Left Nietzscheans tend to focus on epistemological issues, such as radical subjectivity and moral relativism. This focus, he argues, has protected Nietzsche (and themselves) from his politically incorrect arguments about radical aristocracy. According to Bowden, deconstruction and postmodernism have promoted an “à la carte” Nietzsche and bypass his role as a “constructivist philosopher.”<sup>81</sup> Spencer concurs, and characterizes the more complete Nietzsche as “both deconstructive, someone who’s willing to pull the rug out from under the post-Christian worldview of his time, but then also someone who’s trying to revive and reinvent an older morality.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Rev. Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Our Dangerous Politics of Resentment,” *The Blog. HuffPost*, May 19, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Bowden, “Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche.”

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

Given its commitment to equality, the Left has been reluctant to embrace Nietzschean *ressentiment* as a political force capable of transforming society. Following the 2016 election, Stefan Dolgert argued that it was a mistake for the Left to cede *ressentiment* to the political Right and, more specifically, white supremacists.<sup>83</sup> He calls on progressives to recognize that *ressentiment* exists and figure out how they can best use it for change. Although *ressentiment* springs from a sense of injury that, as Nietzsche warned, can quickly become explosive, Dolgert claims that bourgeois subjectivity and "negative emotions" are the tools that progressives currently have. Citing the revolutions of 1789, 1848, and 1917, among others, he concludes that *ressentiment* has been effective in democratic revolutions. Dolgert notes that progressive social movements, such as civil rights, labor, and women's rights have also used *ressentiment* to mobilize supporters. His risky conclusion is: "We need enemy-narratives to win elections, so let us find some worth targeting....Resentment will flow somewhere, regardless of how we chastise or correct it, and if we cannot find a useful outlet for it, then we have no one to blame but ourselves."<sup>84</sup>

Here one might ask whether the Left mistakenly reads Nietzsche as losers (in Bull's sense above) or, more precisely, as the ascetic priests of a progressive flock. Elsewhere I have discussed Bernie Sander's campaign as a mobilization of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Pollsters and pundits argued that Sanders and Trump, unlike the more cerebral, policy-wonkish Clinton, mobilized their constituents by appealing to visceral emotions of anger and fear prompted by economic dispossession.<sup>85</sup> Although Sanders' primary message addressed working-class voters' sense of injustice created by economic inequality, he did increasingly fuel his supporters' sense of *ressentiment* as his campaign progressed. With tragic irony, Sanders began to resemble Trump; he became another ascetic

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<sup>83</sup> Stefan Dolgert, "The Praise of *Ressentiment*: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Donald Trump," *New Political Science: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 38, no. 3 (July 2016), 354–369. For a more extensive discussion, see my "Nietzsche, Adorno, and the Musical Spirit of *Ressentiment* and Redemption."

<sup>84</sup> Dolgert, 369.

<sup>85</sup> Stephen Collinson, "How Trump and Sanders Tapped America's Economic Rage," *CNN*, March 19, 2016.

priest, now ministering to *ressentiment* on the Left. More generally, as identity politics came to dominate the progressive Left, their class war began to mirror the Right's culture war.

From the perspective of Right Nietzscheans, this Left Nietzschean politics illustrates the unfortunate reversal Thistlethwaite anticipated. Although the Left may play "the underdog," Spencer argues it actually controls "the Cathedral." On this point, it is worth quoting Spencer at length:

I understand the Left in a way....What I find so amazing about the people who are protesting me out there, who are attempting to create the largest safe space in the world of 100,000 people at Kyle Field, is that they think they're the underdog. Let me let you in on a secret: Richard Spencer is not the Establishment. Richard Spencer is not running the government. Richard Spencer is effectively a heretic in the modern age. Think about those places of power. The US military, public education (academia), and major corporations whether they're financial on the east coast, Silicon Valley, what have you. What do they all agree on? "Diversity is good." "We're all the same." "We're one world." "C'mon man, we all bleed red." You might think that kind of limp liberalism is some kind of underdog perspective, that you're speaking truth to power by saying that nonsense. You are not speaking truth to power. The military-industrial complex agrees with you, so does every major corporation, so does the US government. You are not speaking truth to power, you are power speaking.<sup>86</sup>

Although neither side admits it, Right and Left Nietzscheans have become slave moralists with their respective ascetic priests ministering to a herd increasingly suffering from *ressentiment*. In 2022, Thistlethwaite's earlier insight—"when you mirror your enemy, you become your enemy"—seems more relevant than ever.

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<sup>86</sup> Spencer, "Texas A & M Speech."

## Last Men, Overmen, and Wannabes

According to Nietzsche, the rule of ascetic priests culminates in modern society, when it will yield either the overman or the last man. In a passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* frequently quoted by the alt-right, Nietzsche presents humanity as a tightrope between the animals and the overman: "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss."<sup>87</sup> By giving man a conscience, ascetic priests made him interesting, created new possibilities, and built "the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of *being*."<sup>88</sup> Unfortunately, the last man cannot comprehend the distinction between man and overman, or his own decreasing capacity to create. At the end of Zarathustra's prologue, the crowd interrupts and calls to Zarathustra: "Give us this last man, O Zarathustra,...Turn us into these last men! Then we shall make you a gift of the overman." Their response saddens Zarathustra, who responds "They do not understand me: I am not the mouth for these ears."<sup>89</sup>

The crowd who cannot hear Zarathustra is composed of herd animals who are the products of liberal democratic and socialist politics alike. As Nietzsche puts it, "They [liberals and socialists] are at one with the lot in their thorough and instinctive hostility to every other form of society except that of the autonomous herd....They are at one, the lot of them, in their faith in the community as the savior, in short in the herd, in 'themselves.'"<sup>90</sup> Despite other profound differences between their principles of equality, liberalism and socialism share the life-denying will to power of slave morality. Nietzsche argues that "To have to and want to have more—*growth*, in one word—that is life itself."<sup>91</sup> Of socialists' call to end capitalist exploitation, he says it sounds "as if they promised to

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<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 126. In "Who Owns Vitalism?," Haywire adds "I believe that Bronze Age Pervert is a bridge between the Dissident Right and the Art Right." Art Right is her term for the Alt Right, which she argues is best seen as an aesthetic movement.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #258.

<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 130.

<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, First Essay, #13.

<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, #125.

invent a way of life that would dispense with all organic functions.”<sup>92</sup> However, he regards vulgar exploitation, not exploitation itself, as the problem with capitalism. “Oddly, submission to powerful, frightening, even terrible persons, like tyrants and generals, is not experienced as nearly so painful as this submission [the worker’s sale of his labor] to unknown and uninteresting persons, which is what all the luminaries of industry are. What the workers see in the employer is usually only a cunning, bloodsucking dog of a man who speculates on all misery....The manufacturers and entrepreneurs of business probably have been too deficient so far in all those forms and signs of a higher race that alone make a person interesting.”<sup>93</sup> Such vulgarity may even be a catalyst for socialism: “If the nobility of birth showed in their eyes and gestures, there might not be any socialism of the masses. For at bottom the masses are willing to submit to slavery of any kind, if only the higher-ups constantly legitimize themselves as higher, as *born* to command – by having noble manners.”<sup>94</sup>

Here it seems important to state clearly that Nietzsche does not defend antisemitism, nationalism, and/or statism as some Right Nietzscheans do. “*Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles*, that is the end of German philosophy,” he wrote, and “I will have all antisemites shot.”<sup>95</sup> Rather than the Bismarck of “blood and iron,” Nietzsche celebrated Napoleon, as a bulwark to the last man: “Like a last signpost to the other path, Napoleon appeared, the most isolated and late-born man there has ever been, and in him the problem of the noble ideal as *such* made flesh—one might well ponder *what* kind of problem it is: Napoleon this synthesis of the *inhuman* and *superhuman*.”<sup>96</sup> Rather than what he called “national agitations, patriotic palpitations, and...archaizing sentimental inundations,” Nietzsche celebrated “good Europeans,” an evolving, stronger human being of the future. “The democratization of Europe is at the

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<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #259.

<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #40.

<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, #94.

<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 3, #27. Quoted in Sue Prideaux, “Far Right, Humourless?”

<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, #105.

same time an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of *tyrants*—taking that word in every sense, including the most spiritual.”<sup>97</sup> Good Europeans are “rarer and rarely contented human beings who are too comprehensive to find satisfaction in any fatherlandishness...”<sup>98</sup> It is these “free spirits” who show others the way to the overman. Along with Napoleon, Bizet, Goethe, Schopenhauer, and Wagner are among Nietzsche’s examples, though none of them fully realized.

By comparison, the ascetic priests of contemporary right- and left-wing politics, whether Trump and Sanders, or the younger generation of Spencer and his heirs, Yarvin and Vance, seem more like ascetic priests ministering to a sick herd seething with *ressentiment*. One might conclude that they are wannabes masquerading as overmen. In another extensive passage worth quoting, Nietzsche describes such “tricksters,” “agitators,” and “speculators.” He writes:

All honor to the ascetic ideal insofar as it is honest! So long as it believes in itself and does not play tricks on us! But I do not like....these weary and played-out people who wrap themselves in wisdom and look ‘objective’; I do not like these agitators dressed up as heroes who wear the magic cap of ideals on their straw heads;...and I also do not like these latest speculators in idealism, the anti-Semites, who today roll their eyes in a Christian-Aryan-bourgeois manner and exhaust one’s patience by trying to rouse up all the horned-beast elements in the people by a brazen abuse of the cheapest of all agitator’s tricks, moral attitudinizing....<sup>99</sup>

In Nietzschean terms, such ascetic priests or overman wannabes only further weaken their herds whether with false promises of equality or superiority. In contrast, Nietzsche’s overman transcends the slave morality of equality and justice, and the *ressentiment* that fuels it. These higher beings embody a higher justice—called mercy—beyond the categories of our current polarized politics of left and right. Nietzsche describes their higher justice: “The justice which began with, ‘everything is dischargeable, everything must be discharged,’ ends by winking

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<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 242.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, #254.

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Third Essay, #27.

and letting those incapable of discharging their debt go free: it ends, as does every good thing on earth, by overcoming itself.”<sup>100</sup> The overman’s capacity for mercy overcomes the herd’s *ressentiment* and its representative, the state with its laws; it is exercised by the privileged, the exceptional, the few “free spirits,” who are beyond the law.

Nietzsche clearly associates such gift-giving virtue with aristocratic values and he seems to preclude any possibility that it might also serve to ennoble ordinary citizens. His master morality was a form of aristocratic radicalism. However, Scheler’s philosophy again becomes relevant here. Contra Nietzsche, Scheler argues that “Christian ethics has not grown in the soil of *ressentiment*”; it has been deformed historically to become reactive, guilty, and slavish—“a peculiar sham form of love founded in self-hatred and self-flight.”<sup>101</sup> According to Scheler, Nietzsche was blind-sided by the age of utility and missed the profound difference between democracy as slave morality and the principle of democratic solidarity, a secular rendition of the Christian injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself, or what Nietzsche calls “mercy.” In Nietzschean terms, Scheler’s reinterpretation raises the possibility of a future democracy “for all and for none.” Nietzsche gestures toward such a possibility in multiple passages from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, especially with his distinction between “love of the neighbor,” which springs from “bad love of yourselves,” and friendship, which first requires love of self and “an overflowing heart.”<sup>102</sup> Zarathustra says, “The *you* is older than the *I*; the *you* has been pronounced holy, but not yet the *I*: so man crowds toward his neighbor.”<sup>103</sup> He counsels the herd, “Let the future and the farthest be for you the cause of your today: in your friend you shall love the overman as your cause.”<sup>104</sup>

In closing, I return to my opening epigraph which invokes a post-identity politics that no longer needs ascetic priests as its heroes. As Brecht’s Galileo puts it, “The universe has lost its centre overnight, and

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., Second Essay, #10.

<sup>101</sup> Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 125. Also see, Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

<sup>102</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 172–174, 186–191.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 174.

woken up to find it has countless centers. So that each one can now be seen as the centre, or none at all. Suddenly there is a lot of room."<sup>105</sup> Perhaps Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who went to the people and tried to tell us, "*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?*," would finally be pleased.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Brecht, *A Life of Galileo*, scene 1.

<sup>106</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 124.



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# Nietzsche, Aristotle, and Aristocratic Being

Jordan DeJonge

Why approach Nietzsche through Aristotle? It has long been noticed that Nietzsche's insistence on hierarchy and the instrumentalization of political life to produce exemplary human beings bears strong resemblances to the "city in speech" of Plato's *Republic*,<sup>1</sup> where social stratification and the division of labour are needed in order produce and extract the type of human being who can become a philosopher and guide the ship of politics.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Nietzsche clearly counts Plato as one of his interlocutors, if only ultimately as an archenemy.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche has also been

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge 1997), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1968). See: 473d–e for the famous passage on the philosopher kings.

<sup>3</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political*, 2.

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called a political or rhetorical Platonist.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to Aristotle, however, Nietzsche has comparatively little to say, and even less in terms of Aristotle's political theory.<sup>5</sup> The following is not an attempt to locate Aristotle's possible influence on Nietzsche. What, then, could the benefit be of approaching Nietzsche's aristocratic politics in this way?

In the first place, what Aristotle takes as the highest purpose of the political community, while sharing some features in common with the "city in speech" of the *Republic*, is something many contemporary readers, not least of all those on the left, are more apt to endorse in some form or another, that purpose being: the cultivation and activation of the human capacities that constitute happiness in a context where equals among equals take turns to rule. The happiness of citizens as the goal of politics is, according to Domenico Losurdo, one of the fundamental tenets of the decadent politics that Nietzsche seeks to destroy.<sup>6</sup> For Nietzsche, the focus on happiness enervates the human species and leads it to the reign of the "last man," or the complete public irrelevance of noble ways of life.<sup>7</sup> In comparison to Nietzsche, the role of aristocratic presuppositions in Aristotle's conception of the political community become more fascinating. Aristotle's conception of equality is not universalist like our own and, like Nietzsche, he locates equality among superior types within a stratum that depends on the instrumentalization of so-called less venerable forms of human existence for its subsistence. Moreover, Aristotle's aristocratic presuppositions are not clearly separable from what we are most likely to find estimable in his thought. Yet his doctrines

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<sup>4</sup> "What is valid for Nietzsche in Platonism is the conception of the philosopher as prophet and lawgiver, not a doctrine of Being or eidetic structure," in Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Bett, "Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness (with Special Reference to Aristotle and Epicurus)," *Philosophical Topics* 33, No. 2 Nietzsche (Fall 2005): 54.

<sup>6</sup> See, among many instances, Losurdo's paraphrase of Nietzsche's thinking at the time of the *Birth of Tragedy* as to how "the search for earthly happiness pushed the slaves all the more easily to rise in revolt" (157) and his strategy for delegitimizing the grounds for the moral force of idea of the happiness during his so-called positivistic phase (277–278) in Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Compare Zarathustra's speech on the Last Man in his *Prologue*: "No shepherd and one herd! [...] whoever feels different goes voluntarily into the madhouse," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 130.

concerning the attention owed to the capacities that make for happiness—their social conditions, their intermediate status between what is given by mere nature and what requires the accompaniment of craft—find broad resonance with any theory of justice that believes something like the following: that people need to be equipped to make worthwhile use of their freedom; that it is not enough merely “to let be” in a context that forces some groups of people—because they are identified as no more than what they are presently capable of doing in the struggle for the necessities—to use their existent capacities as means for the ends of those who have empowered much richer capacities into being.

There is a case to be made that Aristotle’s thought affords more analytically precise tools than Plato’s for dealing with the following theme: that construing the founding of the political community as the task of a kind of wisdom is accompanied by a view of the presence of nature in human beings as raw material for a higher aim than mere nature actualizes of its “own accord.” This would be a material from which we can extract and shape latent possibilities and capacities in human nature that would not be realized, or not justly attended to, without this intervention. For Aristotle, this view of the purpose of the *polis* is inseparable from his understanding of nature, *telos* [end], potentiality or power, and the nature of being as activity. In short, many of the most important themes in Nietzsche’s works inform Aristotle’s conception of the purpose of politics; a purpose that Nietzsche in one sense shares (i.e., the production of exemplarity) and in another sense refuses (i.e., the goal of happiness).

The purpose of this essay is not simply to identify similarities, however. Its purpose is to compare Aristotle and Nietzsche with the assistance of a frame taken from Stanley Rosen, who specifies more curtly what Losurdo’s method of analysis seems to imply: I mean that the argumentative content of Nietzsche’s assertions should not primarily be read with a view to his desire to achieve consistency in a general theory of being as power or will to power. Instead, such content should primarily be read in terms of how his politically oriented “comprehensive intention” to “liberate humanity from the sickness of decadence” by “a

reappropriation of the aristocratic spirit of the Greeks”<sup>8</sup> makes creative and ingeniously intellectual use of the history of thought.<sup>9</sup>

As “the first and best postmodernist,” Rosen writes, Nietzsche “exemplifies the reappropriation of the Western philosophical tradition [...] as an artist of the deepest refinement.”<sup>10</sup> This is not to say there is no attempt to achieve consistency in his thinking, but rather that the goal of fostering the conditions favourable for the quality of existence that Nietzsche takes as “justificatory” for human life directs his rhetorical transformation and redeployment of elements of the western tradition. In the following I am not trying to show Nietzsche is finally inconsistent or fundamentally at odds with some of his own presuppositions, or that he is a pure rhetorician through and through.<sup>11</sup> Instead, on the strength of the thesis that he is an “artist” of the western philosophical tradition, I will read him as an appropriator and transformer of some fundamental Aristotelian concepts in terms of their implications for the organization of political life. This approach recalls Heidegger’s remark that “with [his] interpretation of the Being of beings Nietzsche advances into the innermost yet broadest circle of Western thought.”<sup>12</sup> “It is this ‘innermost historicity’ of Nietzsche’s thought that warrants reading him” as an appropriator of Aristotle, even though little such indebtedness is mentioned. The value of this consists in the degree to which a comparison of the two thinkers can illuminate Nietzsche’s thought and, more broadly, different interpretive possibilities for talking about being as an activity and the human being as the activation of capacities that can only be acquired through social and political life.

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<sup>8</sup> Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, xvi, 5.

<sup>9</sup> For shorter, essay length treatments of this and related questions by Rosen, see: Stanley Rosen, “Remarks on Nietzsche’s Platonism,” in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language, and Politics*, ed. Tom Darby, Béla Egyed, and Ben Jones (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), and “Nietzsche’s Revolution” in Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Rosen’s emphasis on Nietzsche’s status as rhetorician notwithstanding, he remains a philosopher: “As a work political rhetoric, *Zarathustra* is a work of art; as the expression of Nietzsche’s understanding of human existence, it is a work of philosophy,” in Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (Harper and Row Publishers Inc, 1991), 63.

The essay will involve two sections. In the first section, we will consider how Nietzsche's "homogenization of reality"<sup>13</sup> in a doctrine of "reality as will to power" transforms and redeploys Aristotle's conception of primary being as pure activity such that his denudement of its teleological element redounds to the intensification of its teleological fervour. In the second section we will see how this transforms the deep intertwining of Aristotle's political theory with his ethics into a more stringently aristocratic program than Aristotle himself could have conceived in order to empower socially conditioned capacities into being that could only become existent through this ultimately exploitative structure.

## Section I

As Ciano Aydin observes: "from the beginning of the second half of the 1880s Nietzsche proclaimed explicitly that all reality is will to power [...] his homogenizing of reality as will to power implies that reality has the same character [...] [that it] has only one intrinsic quality."<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche's reduction of everything to movement and force can only promote his political intention if the nature of force he discloses is useful for providing some sort of rank distinction within the realm of the human phenomenon, where most phenomena do not present themselves straightforwardly in terms of this reduction. For our purposes, what above all characterizes the Aristotelian ontology and physics is the rank of dignity afforded to the unmoving exemplary being [god] who, in virtue of the exemplarity and primacy of its being as pure activity, illuminates the intelligible aspects of movement and change.<sup>15</sup> What this means is

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<sup>13</sup> Ciano Aydin. "Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power: Towards an Organization-Struggle Model," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No. 33 (Spring 2007): 29.

<sup>14</sup> Aydin, "Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power," 25.

<sup>15</sup> The interpretation of Aristotle that I express in the following holds that there is a unity to his thinking organized by the preeminent role of the prime mover. This is in some respects the "orthodox" interpretation, advanced by thinkers like Joseph Owens and C.D.C. Reeve. For Owens, the primary sense of being is said to be substance with reference to the primacy of the divine being as the primary substance. This means that the focal unity of the diverse meanings of the term "being" are all owing to the pre-eminence of the prime mover in a

that, for Aristotle, the moving beings whose way of being best approximates the exemplary are the most dignified or noble, and therefore most worthy of resources necessary for the sustenance and enactment of their existence. At the same time, unlike Nietzsche, Aristotle does not reduce everything to “one intrinsic quality.” “Activity,” either of the divine or ordinary kind, is not commensurate with the whole of reality for him, since matter and movement are real, even if everything, insofar as it is, is more or less related or referred to “pure activity,” the highest cause. For Nietzsche, a kind of monist,<sup>16</sup> *everything* is activity. Thus, our question is: how is the reduction of *all* beings to “will to power” a re-working of the Aristotelian teaching that the primary sense of being is “activity” because the primary being is “pure activity”?

According to Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche sought to rethink the conditions for a science of life and physics by raising anew the priority of action or activity over reaction, which the modern sciences had failed to grasp. He writes:

Science, by inclination, understands phenomena in terms of reactive forces and interprets them from this standpoint. Physics is reactive in the same way as biology; things are always seen from the petty side, from

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cosmic hierarchy. Again, consider Reeve: a hylomorphic substance is “something that, in trying to realize its form, is trying to become as much like god as possible. Hence god enters the definitions of all the beings, and is ontologically prior to all of them” (Reeve, *Practices of Reason*, 144). However, some take issue with aspects of the way the prime mover is prioritized. See Enrico Berti for the claim that the prime mover does not enter into the definitions of all beings, and that interpretations like Reeve’s and Owen’s are “platonizing” (Berti, “Multiplicity and Unity of Being in Aristotle,” 203–204). See “The Program of Metaphysics Lambda” for further inquiry into his claim that the prime mover does not cause as the object of desire or imitation.

Enrico Berti, “Multiplicity and Unity of Being in Aristotle,” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101, No. 2 (2001).

Enrico Berti, “The Program of Metaphysics Lambda,” in *Aristotle’s “Metaphysics” Lambda—New Essays*, ed. Christoph Horn (De Gruyter: 2016).

Joseph Owens, *Aristotle’s Gradations of Being in Metaphysics E-Z* (St. Augustine’s Press, 2007).

Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978).

C.D.D. Reeve, *Practices of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

C.D.D. Reeve, *Substantial Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Aydin says he has “tried to show Nietzsche how Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power implies a monism,” “Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power,” 43.



the side of reactions [...] We always think we have done enough when we understand an organism in terms of reactive forces.<sup>17</sup>

Deleuze then cites Nietzsche's *Genealogy*: "one overlooks the essential priority of the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces [...] 'adaptation' follows only after this; the dominant role of the highest functionaries within the organism itself...is denied [in the modern scientific tendency]."<sup>18</sup> The quest for survival does not ultimately explain the behaviour of organisms. The tendency to survive is only an effect of the essentially active element.<sup>19</sup> Adaptation to the environment is a reaction on the part of a more original activity. Reaction presupposes action, assertion, and imposition. The primary or original sense of force is a sheer assertiveness that is not responding to anything but is the being of what puts itself forward. Modern science, however, focuses on responses and not the originality of movement itself.

Much of the invectives that Deleuze presents on behalf of Nietzsche's doctrine cannot be immediately directed at the Aristotelean conception of the science of living beings. This is because, for Aristotle, a living being is in the first place not reacting to anything but rather going out towards its *telos*. The beings of nature are defined as those moving beings that have their own intrinsic cause of movement.<sup>20</sup> There is an affirmative character in Aristotle's conception of a living being. Its own "ability to be" presupposes "already having" its *telos*, insofar as the being of a being as its own distinctive activity means it already possesses its end in some sense if it is to have its capacity to move towards that end in the respect it still lacks it. However, the Aristotelian understanding could be placed under the critique of "vitalism" that Deleuze claims is only the other side of "mechanism," and which just as much needs to be supplanted by the Nietzschean conception of force.

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<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), §13.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, "Physics," trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 192b11–192b24.

Deleuze passes too quickly over the differences between mechanism and vitalism, however, when he explains Nietzsche's critique of modern science's preoccupation with the reactive side of phenomena. It seems clear, in the course of his own remarks, that vitalism is superior to mechanism on Nietzsche's own terms for the reason that, in contrast to mechanism, vitalism attempts to understand an organism from the point of view of an assertiveness irreducible to a response to something else—however it may fail to adequately conceptualize the implications of this. In the passages concerned here, the characteristic that could render the Aristotelian science of living beings as a science of “reactive forces,” like modern biology is said to be, is Aristotle's positing of a final end [*telos*]. Contemporary science “oppose[s] mechanical means to final ends in the theory of life; but these two interpretations are only valid for reactive forces themselves.”<sup>21</sup> This would seem even more true of the positing of an original “unmoved mover” as the cause of all motion in the cosmos.<sup>22</sup> What is in the first place moved, prior to its self-moving, is necessarily reactive, according to the Nietzschean understanding as recounted by Deleuze here.

When we couple this with Aristotle's doctrine of a final end, his self-moving natural beings appear to react, on the one hand, to the movement imparted by the first mover and, second, to the object of desire. Whereas Nietzsche, as Deleuze presents him in this section, seems to be interested in something which is the active cause of even the desirability of its own desired objects.<sup>23</sup> Force creates its own ultimate goals.<sup>24</sup> Both the notion of final and efficient cause illuminate a “reaction” between them that is identified as the organism under study. Modern science does not save us from reactivity by choosing one pole over the other.

Active force, then, as Deleuze presents it, is more radically, the cause of its own movement than an Aristotelian self-moving organism because

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<sup>21</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> See Book  $\Lambda$  (Lambda) of the *Metaphysics*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. What Zarathustra says in “The Wanderer,” Book III: “in the end, one experiences only oneself” in Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 264.

<sup>24</sup> Compare this with Aristotle, for whom the highest end cannot be an object of deliberation. See *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112b12–112b20.

it cannot be said to react to the object of desire, much less the so-called primal cause of motion. The activity Deleuze portrays Nietzsche as looking for is the respect in which the movement towards the desired end is not reacting to an end it is not responsible for.

What is the result? Vitalism needs to be freed from those commitments which keep it fundamentally within the sphere of mechanism. This means a radical re-thinking of the absence of *telos* and first cause of motion without a recourse to a mechanical picture. Vitalism is superior to mechanism but still too enthralled by paradigms which render it just another iteration of mechanism in different terms. Hence, Deleuze asks: “what is the value of vitalism as long as it claims to discover the specificity of life in the same reactive forces that mechanism interprets in another way? The real problem is the discovery of active forces without which the reactions themselves would not be forces.”<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche is concerned, then, with a sense of “activity” that is freed from formal, final, and efficient causes. In other words, what is apparently the elimination of some of the most fundamental Aristotelian concepts in his science of nature.

In fact, this only strengthens the connection between Nietzsche’s doctrine of will to power and Aristotle’s doctrine of the primary sense of being as the divine *energeia* [activity]. However true it may be that, for Aristotle, the beings who self-move within genesis are “reacting,” this cannot be said of the prime mover itself. Here we have a case of what “moves” itself without any external end or efficient cause. To be free of formal, final, and efficient causes—this is precisely what Aristotle’s prime mover itself is said to be in the assertion that its being is pure activity; only, its “lacking” such causes is through the fact that it is so entirely identical with them that it is not possible to speak of reaction or perhaps even proper to speak of “causes” as they should be understood in the context of a science of nature.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Eugene E. Ryan, “Pure Form in Aristotle,” *Phronesis: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1973).

See Ryan’s essay for its argument that the prime mover is not “pure form” and that Aristotle attempts to escape concluding it is “a formless and indefinite being” by conceiving of it as “complete actuality with no need for a reason to be what it is” (223–224). We can conclude from this that the prime mover is not determined by the four causes of the *Physics*. Clearly, it has neither material cause nor efficient cause. But if it has no formal cause, while, as Joseph

At the same time, it must be stressed that the sense in which Nietzsche looks to pure activity and the sense in which Aristotle does are radically different: for Aristotle, pure activity is transcendent and somehow radically other than any of us who occur within genesis. For Nietzsche, it is both us and, in another way, nothing more than becoming or genesis itself, the sole reality.<sup>27</sup> It is as if Nietzsche's ontological rhetoric "sets free" the Aristotelian divine being and makes it constitutive of the whole, as opposed to Aristotle's position, which makes it only the primary reference for being's intelligibility.

What was said above is to speak as though Nietzsche conceives of force as an instant of pure assertive spontaneity prior to a moment of intrinsic relationality to other forces, whereas there is another essential aspect to consider. The conceptual isolation of an aspect of pure spontaneity would give us nothing more than a moment without duration, achieving nothing, whereas Nietzschean force is "by nature, *victorious*" according to Deleuze.<sup>28</sup> If this is to be the locus of value, it will need material through which it can be a state of accomplishment per se *over* something different. Pure spontaneity as the outward thrust from nothingness into being is not enough for force to have the nature of activity.

In other words, if force is to be interpreted as "activity," it has to be in possession of something, and indeed this is what we find. Nietzsche presents force as being what it is always in terms of its dominance over another. As Deleuze says, "force is domination, but also the object on which domination is exercised."<sup>29</sup> In other words, in Nietzsche's conception there is no force that is not already exercising dominion over another, different force. This is what it is *to be* a force: a relationship of difference in domination, submission, and resistance.

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Owens says, "the final cause of a thing coincides with its form since the one is the other" (139), it follows there is a sense in which the prime mover has no *telos* either. See: Joseph Owens, "Teleology of Nature in Aristotle," in *Aristotle: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Rosen: "Nietzsche belongs to Homer's army, as Socrates calls it in the *Theaetetus* (152e1–152e9), namely to those who believe that change is fundamental and all encompassing" in Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, 62. See also: 52.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 6.

On the one hand, force thusly conceived is difference itself in that, as Aydin says, it “is characterized by a relation without relata that precede it or are independent of it.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, to be is to be different but again, this means that an event of domination through which a force maintains itself in its existence is as original as force itself—is force itself; that the very structure of any “singular” instance of force entails multiplicity, mastery, and subordination. Thus, Deleuze can say: “hierarchy is the originary fact, the identity of difference and origin.”<sup>31</sup> There is a necessity of there being something externally determined if the pure assertiveness of force is to be activity, but this determined quantity must also be a force, which is also pure assertion, since the world is reduced to a single quality or principle. It is as if an aspect of force must undergo what it is contrary for force to be according to its own impetus in order for what force properly is to be at all. We will see below how Nietzsche relies on this privileging of one of two equally necessary aspects of force (dominating versus dominated) when he later looks to the nature of force for the grounds of identifying exemplarity in the human phenomenon, where his political concerns will play out.

That Nietzsche understands force as constitutively always already enacting its domination over what is other can be further compared to Aristotle’s conception of the divine *energeia*, specifically in terms of the role that the possession of its *telos* plays in the constitution of Aristotle’s divine being.

Aristotle’s prime mover, the first cause of all other substances, is *energeia* (activity) without *dynamis* (potential). It is “always already” everything it can be, if it would be right to say that it could be. Its activity cannot be thought in terms of the difference between what is potential and what is active, since the potential is the same as the active, only without actively being the same.<sup>32</sup> So, it is not appropriate to conceive of its activity as the activity of activating the potentially active, unless we

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<sup>30</sup> Aydin, “Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power,” 26.

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> “Activity, then, is the existence of the thing not in the way in which we say that it exists potentially,” Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2016), 1048a31.

are speaking of how it activates potential it *is not* identical with, i.e., as the cause of the movement of the beings of nature.

Nonetheless the phenomenon of the difference and the identity between potential and its activation, both within the same and among different substances, is relevant for thinking the divine activity. This is because we discover the divine activity in the first place by attention to our experience of the priority of the active to the potential, together with our experience of their perplexing unity. In other words, by trying to think what potentiality and activation are in our experience, we can be led to a certain understanding of a divine dynamism.

While pure activity has neither movement nor potential, in order to be activity it still needs to “have” something. It needs a possession. Otherwise, it would not be doing anything with anything, whereas activity is always a kind of use or exercise of something. For Aristotle, pure activity is also always “pure *entelecheia*” (active completion). As divine *entelecheia*, Aristotle’s primary being always already has its *telos* in a continuous, dynamic enactment of that having; it is its state of the activity of having itself and doing itself. This word, which Aristotle coined, contains both *telos* and the verb “to have.” Joseph Sachs allows us to emphasize the continuous or dynamic aspect of “having” in his translation of *entelecheia* as “being-at-work-staying-itself,” which has a history of being translated as “actuality.”<sup>33</sup> To exist actually, as opposed to potentially, is to be in this state of *entelecheia*. Clearly, within Aristotelean premises, every living being in some sense “stays itself” through the course of change, so none are without a share in this state, although not in the same fashion as that which is *entelecheia* purely. The living beings of nature approximate this state when they move towards their own *telos* and whatever respect and for however long they have it through such movement. But the intrinsically complete being always fully has the end which, in the world of

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<sup>33</sup> ἐντελέχεια *entelecheia*: “A fusion of the idea of completeness with that of continuity or persistence. Aristotle invents the word by combining ἐντέλεις *enteles* (complete, full-grown) with ἔχειν *echein* (= ἔχῃς *hexis*, to be a certain way by the continuing effort of holding on in that condition), while at the same time punning on ἐνδελέχεια *endelecheia* (persistence) by inserting τέλος *telos* (completion). This is a three-ring circus of a word, at the heart of everything in Aristotle’s thinking, including the definition of motion,” in Joe Sachs, trans. *Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Sate Fe: Green Lion Press, 1999), li.

movement and change, an organism would need to pursue by moving and changing.

Recalling Nietzschean force as “by nature victorious,” we might say: Aristotle’s primary being lives as a permanent, unlosable state of victory, only without anything external or internal to it that it exercises this victory over, since its “difference” from its own end is not thematizable as something it conquers, as something it needs to exert itself on in order to get and keep.<sup>34</sup> *It is success without domination*, but this is what it means to be completely the enactment of one’s own end without any temporal gap or a need for another in order to be.

The upshot is that divine *energeia*, however pure it may be, conceptually retains the differential inherent to the concept of “possessing” as “continual having” that, in embodied beings, manifests as the relationship between a capacity and its activation; in short, “movement.” We could speak, then, of the “motionless dynamism” of divine pure activity, since it is defined as without movement and yet not at all posited as identical to what we ordinarily mean by “stasis.” Aristotle uses a series of examples, taken from the familiar sphere of experience and genesis, to point towards what he means by activity as characterized by a differential.<sup>35</sup>

What I want to emphasize here is that this “motionless dynamism” as the differential that prevents motionless activity from being stasis is what comes to the fore in Nietzsche’s teaching that everything is will to power. It comes to the fore in the understanding of force as always “surplus of force” and in the characteristic and paradoxical “anti-teleological teleology” that sees force as always already having, and yet necessarily always continually seeking, dominance over more.

Nietzsche insists force has no *telos* and that it is always moving and changing. Paradoxically, the elimination of the *telos* means force, like divine *entelecheia*, always already “possesses itself” *completely*, since it is not determined by any *telos* whose lack of possession could render it

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1075a27–1075a30.

<sup>35</sup> “For example, at the same time one is seeing [a thing] and has seen [it], is thinking [something] and has thought [it], is understanding [something] and has understood [it], whereas it is not the case that [at the same time] one is learning [something] and has learned [it], nor that one is being made healthy and has been made healthy,” *Metaphysics*, 1048b16–1048b36.

incomplete. Since force is constitutively always in a state of dominating what is different from it, it always “has” that possession which it needs in order to be. At the same time, it is characterized by no intrinsic trajectory that could determine this possession as merely the first condition of an incomplete state, such as how Aristotle’s enmattered substances are incomplete.

What is important to emphasize here is that completion—as the lack of an intrinsic *telos*—does not abolish the necessity of teleological behaviour; instead, it changes the nature of the *telos* itself by making the lack of *telos* the cause of teleological behaviour. Aydin tells us that “the necessary striving for more power” that defines the monistic quality of force “can be called teleological.” At the same time, Aydin writes: “what we have here is, a in a certain sense, a teleology without *telos*” because “the ‘teleological’ character of the will to power not only has no pre-given, fixed end but also precisely *precludes* such an end.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the precluding of an end to which one reacts through motion towards it (*telos*), or a cause that initiates its movement by imparting its nature to it (efficient cause), means force always has its end (i.e., is complete). However, its dynamism means it is impossible for it to be satisfied with this. It takes this “completion” as its foothold for an indeterminate projection of an object that it, not some “higher cause,” is responsible for its being drawn towards in the movement that follows. The end force “always has” is always possessed with a gesture towards an end it has not yet set for itself. This affects how we conceive its relation to capacity and activation.

A force can only exist as a “making contact” with another in such a way that the other is material for the empowerment towards and realization of a capacity to subdue still more others. In short, it always aims at the expansion or enhancement of its capacities, but since there is nothing to delimit and define what its capacities are [since all *teloi* are precluded], the only capacity that characterizes force pertains to the power to expand the possession of this capacity itself. The activity of expanding its capacity to dominate is also an expansion of its capacity to discharge, since the exercise of its “form-giving” impetus is simultaneously a discharge of its

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<sup>36</sup> Aydin, “Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power,” 26.



power. It has to spend itself in order to expand itself. So, its behaviour aims at a state where its spending itself is at one with its expanding itself, which contextually manifests as so many “strategies” for empowerment.<sup>37</sup>

For these reasons, Aydin can say: “as force must be essentially understood as the directedness at subduing, and as subduing requires a surplus of force, ‘real force’ is by definition a surplus of force”<sup>38</sup> and that “the only motive is the desire for more power and every end is only a means to that.”<sup>39</sup> I.e., real force is what can increase force through the appropriation of other force.

As has already been noted, for Aristotle activity is the primary sense of being.<sup>40</sup> To be activity is precisely to have the *telos* [end] in a continuous fashion, whereas temporal separation from the end is the cause of potentiality and motion, which is at best incomplete or partial activity.<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche’s will to power ontology can be described like this: since he reduces everything to a single quality, he identifies everything with the substratum of reality, and identifies that substratum with pure, or divine, activity. He retains the understanding of activity as *entelecheia* [active completion], but redefines activity by asserting the lack of an intrinsic possession of *telos*, force’s originary state as active possession of what it dominates notwithstanding, in order to articulate it as a state of ceaseless agitation or inability to rest with what it dominates. He combines the denial of *telos* with a refusal of any atemporal and non-moving sense of the term “activity.” This has the effect of temporalizing and foregrounding the dynamism internal to the notion of pure activity. Nietzsche’s result, however, is not a complete erasure of the *telos*, but, as we will see, an opportunity to assert that the locus of value rests with the forms of human existence that maximally approximate the indefinite intensification of the dynamism that conceptually steps forward to compensate for the lack of *telos* that defines the Aristotelian science of

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<sup>37</sup> See note 49.

<sup>38</sup> Aydin, “Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power,” 32.

<sup>39</sup> Aydin, “Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power,” 33.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. “So it is evident that the substance and the form are the activity,” *Metaphysics* 1050b1.

<sup>41</sup> Movements to whom the end or the “for-the-sake-of-which” does not belong are “not cases of action, at least of complete action,” *Metaphysics*, 1048b20–1048b22.

nature and theology. This will enable him to appropriate the language of force for his political rhetoric.

## Interlude

What we saw in the first section was that the nature of force as activity prior to reaction necessarily entailed, as a matter of its constitution, a state of domination over what is other. It enforces its difference, but it also needs a difference on which to act in order to be that difference. At this point, we should avoid Deleuze's interpretation, which sought to establish the co-originality of reactive and active quality within the originality of force itself. As Ashley Woodward reports, Deleuze does not remain within the Nietzschean conception when he posits reactivity as belonging to force as originally as affirmation does.<sup>42</sup> This conception is what allows Deleuze, along with his idiosyncratic interpretation of the eternal return [criticized by Rosen<sup>43</sup> and Donaldson<sup>44</sup>], to hope for a state in which reactivity is purged from existence, allowing Deleuze to interpret away Nietzsche's need for the institution of social hierarchy.

The focus on the purely active element in force as its basic nature becomes a problem for Nietzsche at the level of human phenomena and in terms of the goal of a rank ordering of beings. If the fundamental nature of force is, however relationally determined, self-moving prior to reaction or response to something external to it or a nature it is not responsible for possessing, there is nothing at the level of human appearances that fully instantiates this nature. According to Rosen, Nietzsche never demonstrates how his doctrine of world "as will power" and "chaos"

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<sup>42</sup> "As D'Iorio asserts, neither the word nor the concept of 'reactive forces' ever appears in Nietzsche's philosophy. There are reactive phenomena, but these are 'the result of complex ensembles of configurations of centers of forces that remain in themselves active'" in Ashley Woodward, "Deleuze, Nietzsche, and the Overcoming of Nihilism," *Continental Philosophical Review* 46 (2013): 130.

<sup>43</sup> Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, xiii. See also 151 regarding "the confusion disseminated into Nietzsche studies by books like Deleuze's" and the interesting claim that "democracy and egalitarianism are not well served by the attempt to assimilate all doctrines of emancipation into the celebration of chaos."

<sup>44</sup> Ian Donaldson, "Hierarchy and Ontological Dualism: Rethinking Gilles Deleuze's Nietzsche for Political Philosophy," *History of Political Thought* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2002).

can become the qualities of human experience.<sup>45</sup> What Nietzsche can, at best, give us is a manner of “actively reacting” to the world that more closely approximates the original assertiveness of force that never appears for us as such, but can only be discerned as an image within certain kinds of phenomenal behaviour.

In other words, there is no human being who, within the bounds of an individual actor, could be understood as characterized as fully active in the original sense of force detailed above. If the reduction of beings to forces is to provide a standard for rank ordering, Nietzsche must judge certain manifestations of movement within the human phenomenon as better approximations of “pure activity,” i.e., as movements that exhibit the quality of originating from themselves, if not intrinsically then aesthetically and in comparison to another manner of behaving that produces the opposite impression. Consider the following from the *Genealogy*:

Grant me the sight, but one glance of something perfect, wholly achieved, happy, mighty, triumphant, something still capable of arousing fear! Of a man who justifies man, of a complementary and redeeming lucky hit on the part of man for the sake of which one may still believe in man!<sup>46</sup>

There is one form of human existence, in contrast to another, that gives the human species worth.<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche writes: “slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking,

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Rosen, “Because the intoxication, will, or constructive genius of the artist is in fact an illusory unification of the endless self-differentiation of the will to power, Nietzsche seems to have deprived himself of the ability to explain the presence of a world” in “Poetic Reason in Nietzsche,” in Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 214.

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 480 [Essay 1, §12].

<sup>47</sup> Cf. “Nietzsche [...] seeks to discover an aim or goal that might actually warrant the future of humankind, rather than merely prolong the miserable existence of a dying, misbegotten species. As he sees it, humankind needs an erotogenic goal to galvanize the will, a promise of the future that would renew our confidence in the continued development of the species,” Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political*, 7.

external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally a reaction.”<sup>48</sup> Those who develop slave morality are those who are “denied the true reaction, that of deeds.”

He mentions “action,” “reaction,” “fundamentally a reaction,” and “true reaction.” It seems clear that “true reaction” is equivalent to “action” and that in some respect “reaction” is not an action at all. But what is the basis for this distinction? All actions are, in a sense, reactions if we view the world mechanically, bio-chemically, or purely from the point of view of cause and effect; all except for that first unprompted action—the divine one. Only God’s action is not a reaction; that is to say, not amendable to being reductively understood as such. Read with his will to power ontology, Nietzsche’s “true reaction” counts as an “action” because it shares in the metaphysical quality of “first cause.” This quality has not disappeared in Nietzsche’s imagination merely because he has done away with concentrating the first cause into any one original, self-contained being. It is interpreted as the engine of anarchy itself, equally everywhere as the true essence of every reaction.<sup>49</sup> In the description of the *Genealogy*, the prompted reaction of the master is active, despite being prompted, whereas the slave’s is not. What can this mean except that in some way, the prompted (re)action of the master exemplifies pure activity more thoroughly or more completely than the slave does, and this is what makes the sight of him salutary?<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 473 [Essay 1, §10].

<sup>49</sup> Consider when Aydin speaks of the “differentiated activities” that are aspects of the will to power, naming such activities as attachment, secretion, compressing and detachment. These “activities” are contextual responses to the possibilities of determinate situations and differences between weakness and strength. However, as responses they are strategies aimed at empowerment. Empowerment is, at were, the “focal meaning” of will to power understood as differentiated activities. All such activities, Aydin says, “are means for gaining more power [...] on the condition that ‘means’ and ‘end’ cannot be separated from each other; the will to power is not a fixed end, but rather an active directedness,” i.e., an active directedness at empowerment. “Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power,” 34.

<sup>50</sup> This section describes the moment where the slave’s *ressentiment* becomes “creative,” hence it would seem impossible to reduce this “reaction” to pure mechanical movement. However, we could say that what is true of the master is true of the slave here: the master’s “genuine reaction” approximates the original assertiveness of force, whereas the slave’s “creative reactivity” is tainted by its approximation to pure being-moved.

For Aristotle, unlike Nietzsche,<sup>51</sup> the world is not an illusion that supervenes on the entanglements of pure activity with itself. However, activity and movement are partially intelligible, according to him, in the light of the “motionless dynamism” of the divine being. Human beings, not being the noblest sorts of beings in the cosmos,<sup>52</sup> can never fully approximate the life of the prime mover. However, human happiness, which is the human’s characteristic function, activity, and *telos*, may be more or less like the prime mover’s life. This is what informs his teaching on the care that is owed to the generation and cultivation of capacities and their political entailments. It is to this we now turn in consideration of how Nietzsche’s comparable doctrine of activity transforms Aristotle’s ethical and political teachings concerning the purpose of political life as the facilitation of capacity.

## Section II

Both Aristotle’s and Nietzsche’s political outlooks are determined by their respective versions of “perfectionism,”<sup>53,54</sup> For Aristotle, exemplary human life is that which best approximates the activity of the divine being.<sup>55</sup> For Nietzsche, exemplary human phenomena will be those in-themselves-senseless “perturbations of chaos,”<sup>56</sup> but now as they appear in the realm of ordinary human experience such that they best

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<sup>51</sup> See note 56.

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a30–1141b1.

<sup>53</sup> See Chapter 1, “Political Perfectionism” in Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political*.

<sup>54</sup> “The proper aim of [Aristotle’s] *polis* is the happiness of its citizens, and the proper task of the science of politics is to perfect them by providing them with a just political order embodied in a constitution and laws,” Fred D. Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>55</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b24–1178a22, for the claim we ought to strive to be as divine as possible.

<sup>56</sup> I take this phrasing from Rosen’s claim in “The Mask of Enlightenment,” 3–4: “In the still more radical thought of Nietzsche, doctrines of structure and value are redefined as perspectives or arbitrary interpretations of the perturbations of chaos, not by independent and coherent subjects but by an unstable and continuously dissolving differential of multiple body-egos, to coin a phrase for what is itself only a temporary organization of the accumulation and dissolution of points of force.”

approximate the original “out-of-itself” quality that defines force as such. Nietzsche’s understanding of the purpose of the *polis*, then, is to facilitate such exemplarity. What remains to be seen is how Aristotle’s conception of the *polis* concerns the empowerment of capacities into being; how his conception of “pure activity” informs this, how and why this renders some human beings “material” or “mere nature” for the sake of a higher, or normatively conceived, nature, and what sort of effects the Nietzschean re-working of *telos*, *dynamis* and *entelecheia* would have on these basic presuppositions.

Aristotle explains the difference between capacity and activation through the intrinsically meaningful “motionless dynamism” that constitutes the being of the highest being as the being of thought thinking itself thinking.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, he appears to have at hand the beginning of a justification for seeing the capacities of some beings as the requisite material for the sake of the existence of higher capacities they themselves will not enjoy possessing. The lower should be for the sake of making the higher possible. What is “high” and what is “low” looks to a standard which differentiates them: that which empowers into being the capacity to think and speak well in accordance with virtue. According to David Depew:

The scale on which [Aristotle] measures cultures is the degree to which, in the course of communicative interaction, objects accessible only to speech and thought, and so expressive of the distinctive potentialities of mind (*dianoia*), become the focus of shared life rather than as merely serving as more powerful tools for the satisfactions of needs and desires that are shared with other animals [...] In the ideal case, discursive speech becomes a conceptual medium in which aspects of the *kosmos* that are not open to nonrational animals, but have intrinsic value are constituted as objects of desire, discussion, and contemplative apprehension.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “Itself, therefore, is what it thinks, seeing that it is the greatest thing, and its thinking is a thinking of thinking,” in *Metaphysics Lambda*, trans. Lindsay Judson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2019), 1074b34.

<sup>58</sup> David J. Depew. “The Ethics of Aristotle’s Politics,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 403–404.

In the above, we can discern Aristotle's standard for exemplarity. According to Fred D. Miller, for Aristotle "the most authoritative good for human beings consists in the fullest possible realization of their nature,"<sup>59</sup> while the aim (*telos*) of the *polis* is to facilitate this good. As Miller further observes, for Aristotle "everything (including a human being) is defined by its function and power [*dynamis*]."<sup>60</sup> In this doctrine of the identity of capacity [*dynamis*] with definition, the function of a thing is to activate well those capacities it possesses which circumscribe what it is. In the human case, this means that our function is to do well those sorts of activities that distinguish us from other life forms; as Depew notes above, this means the capacity to access objects available "only to speech and thought, and so expressive of the distinctive potentialities of mind," although we should not take this in a sense that is separable from justice and the full range of virtues he discusses in the *Ethics*, not all of which concern what we would consider "intellectual" activities. So, the purpose of the *polis* is to complete, by enabling the activation of, the full scope of virtuous human nature.<sup>61</sup>

Typically, a nature is thought to be a thing which realizes itself without the external intervention of craft.<sup>62</sup> However, taking the *polis* as necessary for the completion of human nature presents a problem for the strict nature/craft dichotomy. As Depew writes, according to Aristotle "the distinctively human way of being biological is to be cultural,"<sup>63</sup> while Miller cites D. Key's claim that "by analogy, the *polis* is an artefact of practical reason just as a ship or a cloak or a sandal is an artefact of productive reason."<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, while we might think of the *polis* in terms of its social and political organization, of course it requires manufactured entities like houses, clothing, cookware, and roads, and so on. If the *polis* enables the natural *telos* of the human being, there is an evident

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<sup>59</sup> Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Miller, *Nature, Justice and Rights*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> In the *Politics*, as Depew reports, "[Aristotle's] conception identifies 'only those activities [as] part of the human good which are activities of good citizens in the good polis,'" "The Ethics of Aristotle's Politics," 400.

<sup>62</sup> See the opening of *Physics* II.

<sup>63</sup> Depew, "The Ethics of Aristotle's Politics," 403.

<sup>64</sup> Miller, *Nature, Justice and Rights*, 39.

sense in which the *polis* itself is not natural, at least not in the same sense as those entities that realize themselves without deliberation or craft.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, if culture is “natural,” there must be a sense of nature that is intermediate between production and what realizes itself without any human intervention. Julia Annas’ paper is helpful in this respect. One of the aims of her essay “Aristotle on Human and Political Virtue” (1996) is to clarify some problems that arise on account of the fact that “[Aristotle] never systematically investigates nature as an ethical or political concept.”<sup>66</sup> In the course of this investigation, she isolates a conception of nature she calls “mere nature,” distinguishing it from nature in the “full sense,” by which she means normative or “ideal.” Mere nature “is simply the basic material of human beings which, so far from having its own reliable built-in goals, can be developed in quite opposite directions by habit and reason.”<sup>67</sup> That is to say, “mere nature” can be developed into habits that are contrary to reason and happiness no less than in accord with them. Hence, this sense of nature “is explicitly no guide to what is better and what is worse.”<sup>68</sup> In short, because human beings will not develop their distinctive capacities simply in due course, like how a seed will become a tree without the need of any deliberation, education, or consciousness, “mere nature” is the available material in human beings that, of itself, will not achieve the distinctly human good. All human beings, then, are defined by an aspect of nature that does not happen “for the most part,” or what Annas calls nature in the sense of the “usual.” In short, all individual humans are, by nature, incomplete without an intervention on behalf of “ideal nature” for the purposes of empowering latent capacities into a position in which it is actually possible for them to be activated.

However, with an eye to the question of hierarchy, what, specifically, is necessary for enabling this intervention itself as an actual possibility?

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<sup>65</sup> The fact notwithstanding that Aristotle claims the *polis* exists by nature, and that it exists by nature prior to the individual Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1253a20–1253a29.

<sup>66</sup> Julia Annas, “Aristotle’s ‘Politics’: A Symposium: Aristotle on Human Nature and Political Virtue,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 49, No. 4 (June 1996): 731.

<sup>67</sup> Annas, “Aristotle on Human Nature and Political Virtue,” 734.

<sup>68</sup> Annas, “Aristotle on Human Nature and Political Virtue,” 735.



And how does this division between mere and normative nature map onto the division between human beings as separate individuals? As was said above, the *polis* is the primary condition for the activation of the sorts of capacities that constitute individual happiness; the latter is the higher *telos* for the sake of which the *polis* comes into being,<sup>69</sup> while the maintenance of the *polis* itself will become the higher *telos* of various activities within it. What, then, is required for the *polis* to be the sort of thing that can enable the achievement of the distinctly human end? As Annas says:

The development of political virtue not only is difficult but requires considerable *σχολή* or ‘leisure’ and this in turn requires a very considerable infrastructure—in fact, a whole layer of economic activity which is carried out by people who are not themselves citizens and hence not ‘parts’ of the *polis*.<sup>70</sup>

It is here that we find that, for Aristotle, the *polis* does not enable all individuals to share equally in the highest human state. Rather, the activity of many individuals within the *polis* must be instrumentalized for the sake of the subsistence of its form, without themselves counting as its proper parts. In this, there is an analogy between the labouring and slave classes and the “mere nature” or material present in the rational individual. It is as if the labouring classes, using their particular capacities to contribute to the city’s common life, do work that is, in itself, “explicitly no guide to what is better and what is worse.” Collectively, they stand in relation to those whom they enable to inhabit the sphere

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<sup>69</sup> The city comes “into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well,” *Politics* 1252b28. The activity of “living well,” however, cannot be a state belonging solely to the community as a whole; it is said of the community with reference to its capacity to facilitate the happiness of its individual citizens. Compare Depew: Aristotle’s ethics is “entirely politically,” but “it is not because Aristotle treated individuals as mere cogs in the wheel of the state, as fascists did. He regarded any notion of a happy state not founded on the happiness of its individual citizens as incoherent,” “The Ethics of Aristotle’s Politics,” 399. Also, see Miller: “Aristotle’s provocative claim that the *polis* is prior by nature to the individual does not entail that he views the *polis* as an organism or substance. Rather, the priority claim rests on the principle of community that individuals can realize their potential only if they are subject to the authority of the polis,” *Nature, Justice, and Rights*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Annas, “Aristotle on Human Nature and Political Virtue,” 738.

of leisure like how the “mere nature” in the individual stands in relation to himself: something to be guided by the normative end accessible only to intelligence. The overall form or structure of the good *polis*, which the citizens govern as equals, guides the capacities of the workers towards enabling the activation of the highest end of human life, but it is the leisured themselves who activate it. It is as if the highest capacities of human nature *in general*, which nevertheless can only be activated in concrete human individuals, can only be enabled into actual existence in the comparative few, and for the sake of which the lower capacities of others must be appropriated.

Nietzsche, rather beautifully, articulates what we might call his version of “mere nature” in *Beyond Good and Evil* when he writes:

In man *creature* and *creator* are united: in man there is material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos; but in man there is also creator, form giver, hammer, hardness, spectator and divinity, and seventh day.<sup>71</sup>

The creator, form giver, and hammer are to work on the material, fragment and excess in order to organize the chaos in such a way that the result is both a spectacle for the gods and a spectacle for oneself as a god. It is worth mentioning this section also contains Nietzsche’s emphatic ridicule at the ideal of “abolishing suffering.” The sense of the passage is that the elimination of suffering, specifically as a requisite of discipline and training, is to fail to care for what it is possible for the human being in general to become, by way of its highest specimens, through the right use of the material nature affords. The passage should be read politically and trans-individualistically, such that if there are not whole classes from whom we withhold our pity, sliding instead into universal empathy for weakness and failure everywhere, we forgo a higher or more sublime “pity”: the kind that emphatically feels for the rarer, higher human type whose genesis we must neglect in order to tend to suffering in general. There is, for Nietzsche, a stark choice between advancing the human species through select specimens, or debasing it on the whole by pitying the situation of each member.

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<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §225.

By calling the city natural, Aristotle acknowledges that certain capacities require social and materially engineered conditions to be empowered to be capacities for activation. Only if there is leisure can the human being reach its apex, and there can only be leisure if there is a city, and there can only be such a kind of leisure-empowering city if there are women as wives and others as slaves and general workers. However, since Nietzsche and Aristotle define the content of human completion differently, it is an open question as to whether they require exploitation to the same degree or in the same circumstances.

What remains to be worked out is how Nietzsche's understanding of what defines the human being leads to a particular sort of emphasis on a so-called necessity of exploitation even in light of the dream of a human *polis* that empowers beings to be able to achieve their *telos* without exploiting others of so-called lower capacities. Would the realization of such a dream affect the content of Aristotle's conception of human completion to the same degree it would Nietzsche's?<sup>72</sup> Recalling Aydin's remark that Nietzsche's will to power ontology amounts to a "teleology without *telos*," we are now in a position to make some remarks as to how Nietzsche's ontology expresses itself in his critique of happiness.

As remarked, Losurdo emphasizes Nietzsche's position that the happiness of the citizens as the goal of politics is the root of modern decadence, albeit a root which itself has deeper roots in the Socratic revolution. But here, Losurdo is primarily speaking of the goal of the happiness of *all* the members of the *polis*. If happiness, as Aristotle defines it above, is the highest horizon of human life, what does Nietzsche's appropriation of the tradition take as his analogue? Might he not conceive of an aristocratic happiness that is exclusive to the few? But how should this differentiate him from Aristotle and how might it make sense of his general animosity towards the Greek eudemonic tradition?

Indeed, Nietzsche's actual remarks on happiness amount to something ambiguous on the whole. Richard Bett is helpful on this point:

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<sup>72</sup> Are we entitled to speak of a human *telos* when it comes to Nietzsche? Daniel Conway speaks freely of Nietzsche's goal of "human perfectibility" or "completion." He qualifies what perfection can mean, such that it keeps in view Nietzsche's anti-teleological commitments and renders "completion" never complete. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political*, 9.

he shows Nietzsche does not have a single consistent position, but sometimes disparages happiness, other times speaks of it honorifically, while at other times he emphasizes its variety and relativity in terms of diverse human types.<sup>73</sup> In relation to Aristotle, his verdict is that “Nietzsche is considerably closer to Aristotle, on issues surrounding happiness, than his own remarks on Aristotle would lead one to expect.”<sup>74</sup> This is because both, albeit in different ways, are a type of ethical perfectionist. Nietzsche’s focus on the aesthetic unity of the self’s stylization and Aristotle’s notion of a harmonious self are comparable, if distinct,<sup>75</sup> while Aristotle, despite his universal definition of happiness, seems to presuppose differences in rank.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, Nietzsche’s overall attitude is critical of, and even hostile to, Greek eudaimonism. What I would like to add is that Nietzsche’s political opposition to the ideal of the happiness of the many can render intelligible the apparently contradictory positions he takes on happiness even as an aristocratic, individualist ideal, which Bett’s paper organizes and comments upon.

Bett identifies Nietzsche’s opposition to the eudemonic tradition primarily in terms of its reliance on a *telos*. What Bett finds as the most common thread in Nietzsche’s critique of eudaimonism is that “[his] focus [in opposing it] is not the selection of happiness as the *telos* so much as on the notion of the *telos* itself.”<sup>77</sup> He compares this to Aristotle, who “has no hesitation in speaking in the singular of the *human* good.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to this, there is a difference in content between the Aristotelian happiness and the Nietzschean tendency, since the latter “often talks as if major psychological conflict is a prerequisite for greatness, or for the happiness of the kind he values,”<sup>79</sup> whereas Aristotle values integration.

We could say, then, that Nietzsche’s similarities to the Aristotelian ethical tradition consist in the intersection of the ethical dimension with

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<sup>73</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 52.

<sup>74</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 59.

<sup>75</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 59.

<sup>76</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 57.

<sup>77</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 54.

<sup>78</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 46.

<sup>79</sup> Bett, “Nietzsche, the Greeks and Happiness,” 58–59.

the same political motivation that animates his ontology. Taking the comprehensive view, against initial appearances, it is precisely the *telos* Nietzsche holds onto while it is happiness he dispenses with. I mean, he adopts the pathos of a *telos* in order to maintain the level of intensity required for the appropriation of the lower and more multiple for the sake of the higher and more unified. In other words, Nietzsche appropriates Aristotle's aristocratic understanding of happiness as the horizon of human life, with the requisite structure of exploitation for the sake of the empowerment of certain kinds of capacities, but jettisons the content of Aristotle's conception of happiness.

We can combine Losurdo's scholarship together with Bett's in seeing that Nietzsche's opposition to the ideal of happiness is not an opposition to the perfectionism of Aristotle's notion of happiness. It is, above all, an opposition to the implicit egalitarian traces in Aristotle's definition of happiness, even if the latter never conceived happiness in an egalitarian way. The problem with the notion of happiness is the problem of human completability. In order to preserve the noble phenomenon, as Nietzsche articulates it, the human being can never be completed. Why?

Precisely so that it cannot offer a stable target whose image can be appropriated by the vulgar under the new, modern horizon. Aristotle's conception of the human function is vulnerable to democratic debase-ment because it grounds its notion of completion in a "reality" that, at least conceptually, does not depend on exploitation or other unpalpable aspects of human society. It is therefore capable of gesturing towards a target that seems to harmonize with egalitarian premises. Even if the prime mover is interpreted as a reification of thought in the service of aristocracy, its life as the paradigm of our own seems to imply exploitation and appropriation may not be finally or ultimately necessary; that, since the "substance" or "reality" of happiness is transcendent, it is compatible with a society that strives to abolish its exploitative element. In short, because Aristotle defines happiness in relation to objects of thought and speech, on the basis of a being that just is the activity of thought, his aristocratic notion of happiness might enshrine an ideal of peace or private life that detracts from the sort of conflicts Nietzsche sees as necessary for keeping life aesthetically interesting.

Nietzsche's metaphysical notion of activity, which is the activity of the empowerment of capacity for the sake of expanding capacity, renders more difficult the wrestling of the Aristotelian ideal for an egalitarian politics, because the structure of will to power refuses the possibility of a generalized notion of happiness that any possible construction of a sufficiently materially enhanced society could be built to accommodate. Through, among other things, the rhetoric of a will to power ontology, it will be possible to attack the ideal of happiness as such; to make it so dynamic and diverse that it will be incapable of being the guiding star of political organization.<sup>80</sup> The goal of the *polis*, then, cannot be defined as something which technology or an ingenuous scheme of social organization could ever achieve, somehow bypassing the exploitative structure of Aristotle's *polis*. It has to be defined through the necessity of *continual* exploitation, and the *indefinite* heights such exploitation can empower some of us to achieve.

In other words, the definition of force as a state of domination over the dominated, and always with a view towards an indefinite projection of its strength for the purpose of enhancement, has its analogue on the human level in the need for a principle of permanent openness in the horizon of human perfectibility. The metaphysical impossibility of human completion, the highest consequence of the death of God, only intensifies Nietzsche's perfectionism; it does not permit a slackening of the spirit<sup>81</sup> or justify the *laissez aller* attitude.<sup>82</sup> Since the *telos* is only ever possessed as the stepping-stone to the enhancement of power, any understanding of the human *telos* that would pacify the drive to impose oneself further and settle into a tranquility constitutes a defection from the exemplarity discerned from the way of will to power.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps this is why Stanley Rosen says that Nietzsche replaces "happiness" with the

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<sup>80</sup> See Losurdo for how "the idea of happiness could [...] be confuted [by Nietzsche] at the 'scientific' level by emphasizing the anthropocentric presumption and the groundlessness and epistemological pointlessness of talking about human rights," *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*, 288.

<sup>81</sup> Compare his remarks on the tension of the bow in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, or his remarks in §225: "you want, if possible [...] to abolish suffering. And we? It really seems that *we* would rather have it higher and worse than ever."

<sup>82</sup> See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §188.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "On the Teachers of Virtue," 140.

“satisfaction” afforded by world building.<sup>84</sup> Only the very *few* can build the world. A real world requires that many live in it.

## Conclusion

Now, for some concluding remarks about how Nietzsche’s aristocratism differs from Aristotle’s. Is it possible to regard Aristotle’s position on slavery and class and gender inequality as expressions of a certain moral naivete?<sup>85</sup> If to be modern, or late modern, is to exist in a historical period where the truth of an axiom of human equality is more perspicuous to our moral intuition, in part due to the treasury of reflection on centuries of human experience as well as novel material conditions,<sup>86</sup> then opposition to that axiom in our own epoch opens one to a stronger charge that one “should know better.” Second, if an egalitarian project depends on the historically modifiable conditions of such perspicacity to, if not the masses, then at least to a decisive elite, then, although the material component of those conditions is not within Nietzsche’s power to affect, their immaterial conditions may be within his power to undermine discursively and rhetorically.<sup>87</sup> Hence, the view of Nietzsche’s project as fundamentally a rhetorical program for the sake of deconstructing the perspicacity of the egalitarian axiom by destroying the sense of shame—which in modernity favours democratic dispositions instead of aristocratic honour—and liberating the containment of difference by the destruction of the idea of oneness as unproduced, an idea on which equality’s ease of intuition depends. Aristotle has no comparable project.

Consider Nietzsche’s remarks on the necessity of slavery for the sake of genuine culture:

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<sup>84</sup> Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> See Depew for specific references to various scholarly attempts to weaken Aristotle’s commitment to slavery. In his own view, “Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery is more embedded in his political theory than any of [his cited] interpretations suggest,” “The Ethics of Aristotle’s Politics,” 413.

<sup>86</sup> i.e., what Lorusso articulates as ‘theoretical culture’ and “Alexandrianism,” e.g., *Nietzsche, The Aristocratic Rebel*, 30.

<sup>87</sup> This is my understanding of Rosen’s conception of Nietzsche’s “comprehension intention.”

Now we have the general concept under which we must classify the Greek's perception of slavery and labour. They regarded both as a necessary indignity, of which one is ashamed: hidden in this feeling is the unconscious knowledge that the true goal *needs* these prerequisites, but here lies the terrible and predatory quality of nature, the sphinx presenting the torso of a beautiful girl with the intention of glorifying the artistic freedom of cultural life. Culture, which I understand to be mainly a true need for art, has a terrifying foundation: and it is this that reveals itself in the vague sense of shame. To supply the soil for a greater development of art, the vast majority, in the service of a minority, must be enslaved to the demands of life *beyond* their individual need. The privileged class must be freed from the struggle for existence at the expense of the majority, in order to create a new world of [artistic] need. Accordingly, we must be prepared to declare that slavery, as the cruel fundamental condition of any culture, is an integral part of the essence of a culture: an insight that can give one a real fright of nature [...] Here is the real source of that badly concealed rage against the arts, but also against classical antiquity, nurtured by communists and socialists and by their paler descendants: the white race of liberals of all times.<sup>88</sup>

Representative of Nietzsche's early thinking, this passage is remarkable in several respects. It shows how Nietzsche takes himself to be consciously retrieving a "terrible" truth about nature which the Greeks knew only unconsciously, and upon which the entire foundation of the Greek artistic sensibility rests. The terribleness of the natural necessity of enslavement belongs to that "terribleness" of the truth of nature in general, and which the Greeks therapeutically conceal from themselves in their well-ordered Olympian illusions, illusions which both draw from but also transfigure and hide the cosmic anarchy and terror of the pre-Olympian world. In short, the Greeks were not fully aware of why they perceived slavery to be necessary or why they so disdained the so-called dignity of labour, but the strength of their artistic instinct led them to it. Second, there is no suggestion of *natural* slavery in this passage of the kind Aristotle theorizes.<sup>89</sup> In the *Politics*, the natural slave is somehow

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<sup>88</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writing from the Early Notebooks*, trans. Ladislaus Löb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69–70 [EN 10 (1)].

<sup>89</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1253b1–1255b16.



fitted by nature on an individual level to be the instrument for the realization of his master's higher aim.<sup>90</sup> To some degree, Aristotle tends to suggest, the slave is completed by serving.

Instead, with Nietzsche, what is natural is not this or that slave's fittingness to serve, but rather the overall structure by which a certain kind of distinctively human possibility (a need and capacity for a certain quality of art) entails slavery as its own condition of possibility. Slaves do not exist "by nature" and it is part of nature's terribleness that they nonetheless need to exist if nature's regenerative powers against the indifference to life it inadvertently counsels are to be accessed in a way consonant with nature's bestowal of the powers of enhancement and life-affirming joy.<sup>91</sup>

A second significant difference from Aristotle emerges, then: for Nietzsche, slavery is not necessary merely so that some individuals can have a zone of freedom from the sort of concerns that make leisure impossible, but rather, and especially, so that there may be that *pathos* of distance between a person and the baseline struggle for existence that is needed for a specific type of artistic beautification of the world. Slavery is necessary for the production of an aesthetic reality, the appreciation of which Nietzsche takes as basically justificatory for living—"justificatory" because *rejuvenating*. This "aesthetic reality" must cure us of the nihilism life itself induces in its truth, while at the same time, the cure cannot deviate too much from the truth itself without engendering the decadence which is nihilism's other expression. Such is the "art" of the Platonic "good in itself." The nature of the quality of "true" art's sublimity is prescribed by the requirement it be life's cure for life's own disease. A society that is not organized to some measure in sufficient accord with the cruelty of nature will not be capable of producing beautiful and sublime illusions that enliven, as opposed to tranquilize and vitiate.

In effect, as we can still see in Nietzsche's more mature version of this doctrine, he spiritualizes the conditions for leisure that Aristotle's exemplar of the human—the theoretical inquirer—needs, since it is not only

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a18–1255a1.

<sup>91</sup> See the "wisdom" of Silenus, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 42 (section III).

a matter of having the material conditions that allow you to pursue your own ends,<sup>92</sup> in Nietzsche's view, but the affective experience of conscious superiority over a human "base" from which you expropriate, that makes for the capacity for higher human types to exist<sup>93</sup>—types which, in Nietzsche's late teaching, "justify" life in the aesthetic manner he earlier took to be the role of art. In other words, compared to Aristotle, we see an intensification of the reasons that slavery and subservience are necessary; they have become part of the fabric of a spiritual or psychological experience for which there is no possible artificial replacement.<sup>94</sup> This state is a capacity of human beings that, if there were such a thing as a right to be the architectonic *telos* that the *telos* of other individuals ought to serve, could try to justify itself through a claim that it models, in an exemplary way, that activity that is primary in the cosmos, because it is the substratum of all things and, therefore, the reason why beings behave as they do.

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. "Just as a human being is free, we say, when he is for his own sake and not for someone else, in the same way we pursue this [first philosophy] as the only free science, since it alone is for its own sake," Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983a24.

<sup>93</sup> See: Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §257.

<sup>94</sup> See Depew, "The Ethics of Aristotle's Politics," 414, for Depew's remarks on Marx and how Aristotle, unlike Marx, would not countenance a technological solution to the problem of slavery, despite Aristotle's tantalizing hint in that direction when he discusses the fantasy of self-performing devices. Even if Depew's assessment is correct, there remains, in my view, a qualitative difference in the reasons for Aristotle's endorsement of slavery and Nietzsche's. Slavery or subservience as a requirement for freedom from degrading labour, even if this involves a mistaken evaluation of labor as vulgar, is of a different order than preaching the necessity of the psychological experience of being at the top of a social and material hierarchy. Consider *Beyond Good and Evil*, §286, where Nietzsche proclaims the superiority of those who elevate themselves by looking down, as opposed to those who do so by looking to what is above. Aristotle, even with his theory of slavery, belongs to the latter group.

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# **The Aesthetic Politics of Value**



# Nietzsche's Dionysus vs. The Nihilism of Social Media Shitposting

Mike Watson

## Introduction

A quick survey of the landscape of the internet reveals strong nihilistic trends. Meme trends on the political left and right, as well as those published by a sizable apolitical internet usership, often tend toward despondence, depressive ideation, amorality and, at times, misanthropy. Masculine right-wing online subcultures associated with 'incels' and practices of 'blackpilling' essentially reject society and its ethical parameters as a means of processing perceived rejections from the labor market and the female gender.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, on the left a meme tendency has

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<sup>1</sup> Glace, A. M., Dover, T. L., & Zarkin, J. G. (2021), "Psychology of Men and Masculinities: The Journal of Big Ideas.," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 22, no. 2 (2021): pp. 288–297, <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000328>.

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grown up around the image of the late British theorist Mark Fisher, who bemoaned the lack of alternatives to capitalism and its tendency to cause what he called a ‘depressive hedonia’ in the millennial generation students he taught in the ‘00 s.<sup>2</sup> However, rather than a problem to be overcome, many Mark Fisher meme creators appear to embrace inertia and the inevitability of depression, despite Fisher pointing to fissures in the system that may allow for alternatives. Additionally, a number of non-politically aligned trends have grown up around the social media video platform TikTok, involving a degree of dissociation from everyday life. For example, ‘reality shifting’ involves altering one’s reality through a trance induced just prior to sleep, to that of another dimension (your ‘desired reality’). Adherents claim that they are able to shift to a reality entirely of their own choosing, (including the most popular choice for shifters, ‘Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry’, from the Harry Potter book and films series).<sup>3</sup> Some TikTok users claim to have shifted reality during their sleep for as long as several years, before returning to this ‘dimension’ as they awake, often bitterly disappointed at having returned to the same spot they had been only hours before they woke. In all three of these examples, a sense of rejection, inertia or escapism indicates an embrace of nihilistic tendencies, where the prefix ‘nihil’ is taken as implying hopelessness, and a desire to erase one’s self, the wider world, or both. In this essay it will be argued that the contemporary nihilistic turn seen in internet trends coincides with the nihilizing effects of habitual internet usage and the concomitant disappointment wrought by the data economy. It will be further asserted that this case of ‘depressive hedonia’, caused by digital-era living is comparable proportionately (if not in kind) with the catatonic effects of bourgeois morality and Christianity identified by Nietzsche. This catatonic effect—described by Adorno in relation to the rigidification of life under Late Capitalism as

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<sup>2</sup> See my own study on the subject of the partial derailment of Fisher’s message via memes. Ultimately I argue that memes of Mark Fisher’s image and theory have positive and negative consequences: Mike Watson, “The Memeing of Mark Fisher: How the Frankfurt School Foresaw Capitalist Realism and What to Do about It” (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2021), 47–60.

<sup>3</sup> See: Eli Somer et al., “Reality Shifting: Psychological Features of an Emergent Online Daydreaming Culture—Current Psychology,” SpringerLink (Springer US, October 30, 2021), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-021-02439-3>.

a “mimesis of death”<sup>4</sup> undertaken to ward off mortality—can be countered according to both Nietzsche and Adorno by the embodying effects of engagement with art, particularly dissonant music. Looking to the parallels between Adorno's conception of the ‘shudder’ and Nietzsche's conception of Dionysian revelry as outlined in the *Birth of Tragedy*, an antidote will be proposed to the depressive lassitude and dissociation that accompanies the terminally online lifestyle.

## Nihilism Misrepresented

Nihilism has been seen as a philosophical refuge for adolescent depressives, artists, Anarchists, Punk Rockers and a myriad of other perceived misfits, to whom the notion of ‘no meaning’ in life presents a divergence from the obligation to duty (to work, to pay rent, to maintain a relationship) which characterizes the hum-drum of the socially conservative (or ‘normie’) lifestyle. The sense of amorality insinuated by the declaration of meaninglessness in life has been seen by successive generational subcultures as liberating, often being associated with drug culture and libidinal freedom. However, this would in reality accord with Nietzsche's embrace of the Dionysian aspects of the human psyche as a counter to the nihilistic tendencies embodied by bourgeois morality and the church. It might indeed be argued that in many cases where nihilism is invoked (or where nihilism is used as an accusatory term against a subculture as part of a wider moral panic), it is actually the case that life is being embraced in opposition to the nihilizing forces of moral conservatism and/or capitalism. However, whereas tendencies once existed that brought people together in the appreciation of music and intoxicants as a community, the millennial and zoomer generations have been denied what were once held to be normal processes of socialization, leading them to descend into the actual nihilism that Nietzsche decried. Trends such as ‘shitposting’

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<sup>4</sup> See: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 44. “The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is mimesis of death”.



and 'edgelordism' signify an embrace of meaninglessness and senselessness that refuses any kind of reversal into life-affirmation. 'Shitposting' implies a deliberate post of poor quality images and/or texts with often deliberately antagonistic intentions, or a deliberate embrace of obscurity. 'Edelordism', on the other hand, denotes the deliberate embrace of extreme views with the explicit intention of thwarting attempts to signify meaning.

Many such tendencies can be seen today revolving around the production of philosophical memes in the form of still images or videos shared on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Tumblr. One example, found on Instagram by searching the hashtag #philosophymemes, features a crudely drawn punter at a bar explaining to a similarly styled barman that: "Yah, so basically I googled, 'what's philosophy?' at 15 and nothing's been right since." An Instagram search for #markfisher features, alongside 13'000 other memes, a cartoon panel depicting an image of the Doomer character (a depressed young man, smoking and wearing black) opposite a copy of Capitalist Realism. The Doomer figure says "Thank you for changing my life," to which the book replies "I am literally the reason you can't enjoy anything anymore." A search for #Nietzsche reveals a photographic image of Nietzsche alongside the quote, "Everything the state says is a lie, and everything it has is stolen."

The above examples demonstrate two main tendencies of philosophical memeing: firstly, negative quotes are taken out of context giving no opportunity for redemption; secondly, philosophical inquiry itself is seen as tending toward nihilistic despair and/or depressiveness, rather than as identifying nihilistic tendencies in society or as embedded into existence, and mitigating against them.

Adorno gives an account of nihilism's genesis and subsequent misappropriation, albeit with regard to philosophy, rather than memes, in *Negative Dialectics*:

Associated with slogans of 'emptiness' and 'senselessness' is that of 'Nihilism'. Jacobi first put the terms to philosophical use and Nietzsche adopted it, presumably from newspaper accounts or terrorist attacks in

Russia. With an irony to which our ears have been dulled in the meantime he used the word to denounce the opposite of what it meant in the practice of political conspirators: to denounce Christianity as the institutionalized negation of the will to live.

Philosophers would not give up the word anymore. In a direction contrary to Nietzsche's, they re-functioned it conformistically into the epitome of a condition that was accused, or was accusing itself, of being null and void.<sup>5</sup>

Adorno here sums up nihilism as an effective refusal of all that *is*, politically, socially, existentially. That such a tendency actually came about as a refusal of the nullity wrought by the moralizing influence of the Church can be seen clearly in the affirmative tendencies of nihilist philosophies which while—following on Nietzsche—refuting God and intrinsic 'meaning' in life, bear an affirmative aspect all the same. Like dark theologies, the work of Georges Bataille and Ray Brassier, among others, suggests that, far from being '*nil*', as its name suggests, nihilism all too often harbors an irrecusable trace of its opposite, which succumbs to 'being'.<sup>6</sup>

## Nietzsche's Radical Yay-Saying

This pathway from nihilism to abundance can be traced to Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although the author himself prefaced the book with an apologia in later editions—given its naive style and obsequious appreciation of Wagner's music and character—its outlining of the Dionysian tendency in art is valuable for this study.

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<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Negative Dialectics", trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2003), 379.

<sup>6</sup> Brassier ends his book *Nihil Unbound*—an uncompromising attempt to entrench Nihilism with no hope of redemption—on the note that: "But to acknowledge this truth, the subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation, nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction." Not only does Brassier hereby conceive of an affirmative role for philosophy within the null void, he also effectively 'plays dead' by declaring everyone to already be dead in order to elevate philosophy (and thereby philosophers) to a special role. The registering of such differentials within the realm of death makes the proclamation of death/nullity itself meaningless in any sense usually understood.

In that first work, Nietzsche already strongly identifies the self-denial of Christianity as representing nihilism, stating that:

For in the face of morality (particularly Christian morality, unconditional morality) life must constantly and inevitably be in the wrong, because life is something essentially amoral—in the end crushed between the weight of contempt and eternal denial, life must be felt to be undesirable, valueless in itself.<sup>7</sup>

It is as clear in this passage as in similar passages in the *Antichrist*, that Nietzsche sees the stultifying practices and morality of Christianity as the principle enemy of life. In the latter work he states that:

Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of opposition to the preservative instincts of strong life; it has depraved the reason even of the intellectually strongest natures by teaching men to feel the supreme values of intellectuality as sinful, as misleading, as temptations.<sup>8</sup>

Looking to these works that bookend his career (The *Antichrist* came out in 1888, the last year that Nietzsche actively published) it is possible to see that the notion of a life-denying creed was the central negative motif against which he posited his 'Overman'. Now nearly 150 years after the publication of his last works (*Ecce Homo* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* were also published in 1888), it is arguable that while Christianity has declined, life-denying processes as such are very much with us in the form of commodification and reification. As Adorno and Horkheimer explain in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), mimesis is a byword for the way in which humans substitute objects for experience, in order to ward off either primary nature, as with the use of magic charms, mythic tales and religious rituals which mime the power of nature in order to once remove its threat. Or to ward off secondary nature, the

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Birth of Tragedy", trans. S. Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ", trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 129.

threat posed by other men, through, for example, capitalist subjugation. Mimesis is ultimately a ruse performed to stave off death and plays out in a manner not dissimilar to the natural animal act of mimicry in 'playing dead' in order to ward off predators.<sup>9</sup> While mimesis and mimicry are actually distinguishable, with the latter marking a simple copying of nature and the former a more rational adaptation of nature, whereby elements are copied in order to supersede nature, for Adorno and Horkheimer mimesis tips over into mimicry under Late Capitalism. As argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the mimesis of nature by the social system results in the domination of the subject recurring as capitalism, as second nature objectifies all subjects as monetary values. So the Christian in deep prayer in front of a religious icon assumes a position of stasis akin to the stillness of the dead matter that materially comprises the icon itself. In this sense bourgeois morality, with its sense of piety and pity, intends at a hollowing out of life in the same way that, later, fascism would compel people into rigidified militaristic stances that themselves mimic death.<sup>10</sup> The question here is over the degree to which the meme—or more particularly the tendency to meme repeatedly—represents an instance of mimesis and indeed mimicry.<sup>11</sup>

By the time Nietzsche wrote the *Antichrist*, he had firmly committed himself to the polemic device of the Overman (first introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), a future embodiment of humanity that would no longer be impelled to follow the weak and death-embracing morality (effectively a form of mimesis of nature's harsh injunctions) that had for Nietzsche laid waste to European civilization. For Nietzsche, the

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<sup>9</sup> As Horkheimer and Adorno argue: "...when men try to become like nature they harden themselves against it. Protection as fear [Schrecken] is a form of mimicry. The reflexes of stiffening and numbness in humans are archaic schemata of the urge to survive: by adaptation to death life pays the toll of its continued existence." Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment," 180.

<sup>10</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment," 149–150.

<sup>11</sup> This accords with the research of Susan Blackmore into memetics, which effectively asks, "Are we being memed?," rather than being subjects who ourselves make memes. In the opening chapter, Blackmore states, "Instead of thinking of our ideas as our own creations, and as working for us, we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied. We humans, because of our powers of imitation, have become just the physical 'hosts' needed for the memes to get around. This is how the world looks from a 'meme's eye view'." Susan Blackmore, "The Meme Machine", (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

Overman takes shape as a man who can say ‘yes to all things’, and therefore suffers the slings and arrows that life throws at us with humility and grace. This ability to accept one’s fate is—contrary to the title of the book if read alone and out of context—embodied by the figure of Jesus himself. It is Christ’s “demeanor on the cross”—as he accepts a fate he knew he would encounter, given his dissidence—that for Nietzsche signals it is the Christian Church that is at fault and not Christ himself. Christ’s acceptance of his fate was exemplary of the acceptance of all things, which Nietzsche posited in distinction to what he saw as the over-pitying nature of the Christian Faith.

He does not resist; he does not defend his rights; he makes no effort to ward off the most extreme penalty—more, he invites it.... And he prays, suffers and loves with those, in those, who do him evil.... Not to defend one’s self, not to show anger, not to lay blames...<sup>12</sup>

It was arguably in the interest of this acceptance of all things that Nietzsche developed the concept of Eternal Recurrence—the notion that all of reality will repeat infinitum—which appears across his works from *The Gay Science* (1882), where it is cast as rhetorical device. Nietzsche postulates the existence of a demon who tells 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...<sup>13</sup>

For Nietzsche the correct response is to tell the Demon, “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.”<sup>14</sup> Christ is then, for Nietzsche, an example of the Overman who can accept fate over again and again. Leaving aside the figure of Christ, this characterization of the Overman, with his ability to accept all things, stands in stark contrast

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ,” 160.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Gay Science”, trans. S. Whiteside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 194.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” *ibid.*

not only to the meek Christian, but to the terminally online nihilist of today. The contemporary nihilist, confronted with a myriad of images and an endless stream of information maintains a rigid and closed countenance. Far from Christ's "demeanor on the cross", as Nietzsche has it, the nihilistic youth of meme culture, as much as the political meme poster is vehemently closed, exhibiting a demeanor of rigid refusal.<sup>15</sup> Where social media users do appear to express agency, by 'liking' everything on their feed, opening as many Instagram stories as possible, or simply looking constantly at content presented to them by algorithms, they are in fact arguably doing the opposite, given the habitual and indiscriminate nature of their engagement.

## Shudder as Antidote to Being Memed

The vibrant affirmation of an eternally recurrent existence is closed to the perpetually online internet user because he or she has already closed himself or herself to the offline (or 'real life') realm. This initial closure leads to a further closure in the face of the intense image-oriented bombardment of online media objects. Ensuing negative memes are an outwards projection of self-inadequacy in the face of the overwhelming force of nature (ultimately, mortality) as refracted via the screen of the internet as second nature (the overwhelming force of data capitalism). This reflects the rigidification of the alienated subject of Late Capitalism, as outlined in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Elements of Antisemitism*, the last chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the facial grimace of the banker, the rag and bone man, and the Fuhrer, is identified as a mimetic comportment to death:

Such mimicry provokes anger, because it puts on show, in face of the new relationships of production, the old fear which one has had to forget in order to survive them. It is the compulsive moment in behavior, the rage

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," open Democracy, November 24, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>.

of the tormentor and of the tormented, reappearing indistinguishably in the grimace that triggers the specific rage of civilized people.<sup>16</sup>

We might today similarly identify the stricken tight-jawed expression of our national leaders as much as of populist right wing protesters, as well as impoverished commuters and other functionaries of capitalism. This grimace starts as an expression of will, set in on the face to ward off threats, before degenerating into stress, taking on the semblance of *rigor mortis*. In relation to the issue of memes, this same process can be seen as arising from an initial inadequacy felt by the subject in face of both nature and capitalism, which is confronted by the production of a meme displaying comic and/or aggressive tendencies expressed against a perceived threat, which is in fact a projection of our fear and disgust at our own mortality. Once posted, the meme commits the poster to its defense as negative comments are fended off, as well as to further posting and to interaction with the content of other meme posters. The countenance of the meme producer may have begun as a comical grin or grimace, though the overall bearing becomes one of rigidified determination, giving into acquiescence—the memer as subject becomes an object of data capitalism. Ultimately mimesis of death via the reaper's grin or mortis jawed grimace will backfire, just as the individual jpeg meme meets its fate as a determinate and finite object—one which in the era of the meme is fleeting to a degree previously unknown in the history of image-based media.

It is arguably the rigidification that occurs as an objectification of the individual subject in spite—or even because—of its rejection of objectification which prompted Adorno to develop the theoretical device, the 'shudder' which he elucidates most clearly in *Aesthetic Theory*, his last unfinished work, still in progress when he died in 1969:

The experience of art as that of its truth or untruth is more than subjective experience: It is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness. The experience is mediated through subjectivity precisely at the point where the subjective reaction is most intense. [...] It

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<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment," 149–150.

[Beethoven's 9th Symphony] resonates like an overwhelming 'Thus it is'. The Shudder is a response coloured by fear of the overwhelming. By its affirmation the music at the same time speaks its truth about untruth.<sup>17</sup>

In the moment of shudder the subject is objectified (again, the irruption of objectivity) but remains simultaneously alive as a subject, able to witness this truth, crucially accepting its concatenation with the object. This moment of truce or oneness with the object has parallels with the eternally recurrent 'everything' which Nietzsche postulates in order to set up his radical affirmation, which he opposes to the nay-saying of Christians and bourgeois Enlightenment moralists. Jay Bernstein's characterization of the shudder supports this argument, underscoring the openness of the subject to objectivity in *The Fate of Art*:

Shudder and mimesis are different aspects of the same moment. Through them there occurs a joining of eros to knowledge which is art's articulation of ethics and knowledge.

Shudder, as dissonance is staged aestheticised, sublime fear, it is the affective acknowledgement of the otherness of the other.<sup>18</sup>

This openness of the shuddering subject to otherness and arguably a saying yes to everything in the Nietzschean sense is useful to us here even if Adorno and Nietzsche could never be reconciled.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche was ever-scathing about the Kantian sensibility, which aimed to reconcile Christianity with rationality, via the universalization of common sense (*sensus communis*) in the moment of appreciation of aesthetic beauty. As such, he arguably would have had little time for Adorno's acquiescence to the possibility of art's reconciling glow (or its "articulation of ethics and knowledge" as Bernstein would have it) despite the thoroughgoing

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<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Aesthetic Theory," trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 244.

<sup>18</sup> Jay Bernstein, "The Fate of Art," (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 222.

<sup>19</sup> A comparison and contrast between Adorno and Nietzsche on the topic of the effects of art on the subject are worthy of a book length study. As regards this essay, the inclusion of Adorno's shudder serves to include capitalism among the forces that nullify life by objectifying the subject, allowing for Nietzsche's critique of nihilistic processes (which he associates with Christianity and bourgeois moralism) to be extended to digital capitalism, via Adorno's critique of Late Capitalism, which necessitates the shudder.



negativity of the Adornian project in general. Adorno's shudder allows for a momentary experience of oneness with the object (i.e., with nature). While Adorno stops short of declaring this as exemplary of the possibility of a common ethics, he does imply over his oeuvre that it is exemplary of the possibility of there being a common ethics, if such a thing were not in fact impossible! As it is, such a mechanism was impeded for Adorno by the irreconcilability of the subject and object on account of the impossibility of the human ever really knowing the natural object (a fact Kant never himself resolved either, though he didn't have to contend with the horror of World War Two and the diminishing effect it had on any hope of finding common human ethical accord). Nietzsche would rather have done away with any hope at reconciliation at all (and with 'hope' itself, which he saw as central to the pitying aspect of Christianity), preferring to simply accept the facts of human behavior.

Despite the lack of congruence between Nietzsche and Adorno's thought, they do find some degree of accord in terms of their proposed response to the nihilizing impulses of, respectively, Christianity and Late Capitalism. Indeed, Nietzsche directly cites Beethoven as one of the contemporary philosophers whose music embodies the Dionysian impulse:

From the Dionysiac soil of the German spirit a power has arisen which has nothing in common with the original conditions of Socratic culture: that culture can neither explain nor excuse it, but instead finds it terrifying and inexplicable, powerful and hostile—German *music*, as we know it pre-eminently in its mighty sun-cycle from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner.<sup>20</sup>

## Towards a Dissonant Meme

Though what precisely is this Dionysian tendency for Nietzsche? Given the impenetrability of the manic prose in *Birth of Tragedy*, it is difficult

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<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Birth of Tragedy," 94.

to say with accuracy. Not least, in part as Dionysian practice—as a kind of inebriated revelry—does not give itself to rationalization.

It is perhaps therefore most expedient in the text format to determine the Dionysian by what it is not, recalling the popular twentieth-century maxim that 'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.'<sup>21</sup> Perhaps cognizant of this Nietzsche wrote in the *Birth of Tragedy*, recalling St. John's and St. Vitus's dance that:

Some people, either through a lack of experience or through obtuseness, turn away with pity or contempt from phenomena such as these from 'folk diseases', bolstered by a sense of their own sanity; these poor creatures have no idea how blighted and ghostly this 'sanity' of theirs sounds, when the glowing life of Dionysian revelers thunders past them.<sup>22</sup>

The St John's or St Vitus's dance (they are in fact different names for the same phenomenon) were instances in the medieval to early Enlightenment period in which dancing epidemics broke out and spread to include entire communities. While variously diagnosed (largely in retrospect) as resulting from the neurological condition, Sydenham's chorea, from collective hysteria or psychosis, or ergot poisoning, the meme-like quality of a contagious and fevered dance has parallels with online hysteria. Yet neither of these phenomena would pass as in any sense usefully Dionysian for Nietzsche, as he posits the Dionysian as part of the Ancient Greek dyad, containing the Apollonian and Dionysian, deriving from the respective gods Apollo and Dionysus, which stand, respectively, for harmony and rationality, and intoxication and disorder. What Nietzsche saw in Ancient Greek Tragedy was a combination of Apollonian and Dionysian values acting as a counterpoint to each other, thereby expressing the contrary forces of nature. For Nietzsche the art of his contemporaries lacked the Dionysian counterpoint to the Apollonian aspect, appearing over codified and rigid as a result. If anything, this would be the position of today's online activity, which despite appearing

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<sup>21</sup> The maxim has been attributed to multiple celebrities and is by now a shorthand for describing the difficulties in doing justice to physical and visceral activities through writing, particularly academic research.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Birth of Tragedy," 17.

erratic and uncontrolled, leaves the user of the internet (who is also effectively also the publisher and protagonist) arguably devoid of both the Dionysian and Apollonian poles of being. Indeed, the aggressive positions of nihilistic, far right or far left meme posters, who reject the perceived bourgeois niceties of the Apollonian, are far from reaching any state of Dionysian ecstasy, as they harden into mimetic copies of the empty husk of corpses, hunched over in their gaming chairs. To meme constantly equals to mime—that is to copy, and thereby become comported and assimilated within that which you copy. In this sense, to meme with no Dionysian or Apollonian input is to mime death, as the frantic activity of copy pasting images and texts, posting them online, then entering into the barrage of discussion before repeating the process, leaves one immobile in face of the screen. In the age of data capitalism, the social media addict befalls the same fate as the religious zealot in front of a Christian icon. In order to ward off death (in the social media age, irrelevance, or being ‘canceled’) the individual subject submits itself to an object of second nature, in front of which the subject carries out repetitive rituals to stave off nature’s threat.

In this light, far from being ‘edgy’ the individual meme poster fully supports the status quo in their inaction. The memes they post may prompt outraged response, but it will only lock them into further posting activity, and a process of objectification. Contrasted with the following description of the experience of Dionysian art’, activities of the online community even in its most extreme forms seem decisively conservative by comparison:

For a brief moment we really become the primordial essence itself, and feel its unbounded lust for and delight in existence. Now we see the struggles, the torment, the destruction of phenomena as necessary, given the constant proliferation of forms of existence forcing and pushing their way into life, the exuberant fertility of the world will.<sup>23</sup>

Just as with Adorno’s description of the experience of listening to Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, we see the irruption of objectivity into the

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Birth of Tragedy,” 17.

subjective sphere as an acceptance of nature in its wild abandon. It is essentially the 'saying yes to all things' that recurs as a theme in Nietzsche's later works in response to his hypothesized Eternal Recurrence. If this is the case, then the activity of the internet shitposter, hunched over his or her screen, is both in its formal tendency and its actual messaging, a '*saying no to all things*'. It is worth noting here that Mark Fisher bemoaned what he called the depressive hedonia of life under capitalism, characterized by among other things, internet addiction, fast food and aversion to Nietzsche.

To be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand. Some students want Nietzsche in the same way that they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp - and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension - that the indigestibility, the difficulty is Nietzsche.<sup>24</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that Fisher chose to cite Nietzsche here, as it was he of all philosophers on the A-Level syllabus,<sup>25</sup> who offered the best antidote to the myopia and lassitude of digital-era life. Indeed, in a blog post of 2006, called *We Want it All*, Fisher asked, '... *which* Nietzsche might be of use, now?'.<sup>26</sup> While he quickly dismissed the 'Dionysian Nietzsche', it was on the pretext that in any case it is the "lost tension *between* Dionysus and Apollo," that Nietzsche mourns. That is to say, Nietzsche was no more Dionysian than he was a nihilist (both being popular misconceptions). Fisher finds "Nietzsche the aristocrat" to be

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Fisher, "Capitalist Realism" (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Fisher talks of his "A-Level" students studying at "college", a point which causes confusion with some non-British natives, given that college in the US and some other systems is equivalent to university in the UK system, while High School is equal to the UK college. Similarly, the A-Level is a qualification taken in UK colleges by around 50% of people aged between 16 and 18. A-Level students are not necessarily among the highest level students as the name may suggest (though it is the highest academic qualification offered at that age). This is perhaps significant as Fisher is effectively berating mostly 16–18 year olds for preferring video games and recreational drug use to Nietzsche, whereas Nietzsche makes platitudes to "narcotic potions" in *Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Fisher, "We Want It All," k-punk, February 12, 2006, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007348.html>.

of more use to us, meaning the Nietzsche who despised, “the insipidity and mediocrity that result from democracy’s leveling impulses.” Fisher uses this observation to launch an attack on the victory of Celebrity Big Brother contestant, Chantelle Houghton, a bleach-blonde nobody whose role was actually to convince the other celebrities she was a somebody despite having no particular talent or fanbase. Going undetected, she eventually won the series by popular vote. Rags to riches stories such as these promote the idea that anyone can be famous, without regard for differentiation in capability or aesthetic values. Such notions underpin the idea that meme culture (especially at its most sardonic) is in fact a process of radical usurpation of power—precisely a ‘saying yes’ to all things by saying no quality control. Yet both Nietzsche and Adorno believe that nihilism can never in itself be a creative force. Saying ‘no’ can simply never be equated with saying ‘yes’.

Negation requires further acts to become generative, while saying yes to all things fundamentally cancels the act of choosing that ‘yes’ entails. Rather, even Nietzsche’s radical yes-saying requires the entwining of harmonic and chaotic forces, of life and death (the originary yeses and nos, which gave birth to affirmative and negative practices). Ultimately, therefore, Nietzsche must be seen as saying yes to all ‘yeses’, as well as to all ‘nos’, and to everything in between.

Yet, how can the disorderly aspect of Dionysian Art, which potentially comprises all things, ever give rise to something positive that might offset the depressive hedonism of twenty-first-century digital life? How might the objectifying forces of bourgeois moralism (for Nietzsche) and capitalism (for Adorno) be countered from amidst the overwhelming din of twenty-first-century image culture (including Fox News, Kardashian-style selfies, conspiratorial youtube videos, New Age spiritualist mulch, in addition to shitpost memes?).

For Nietzsche, as for Adorno, it is the rupture caused by the dissonant in music (and particularly, at the time of writing *Birth of Tragedy*, in Wagner’s compositions), which gives the effect of making us “want to hear and long to go beyond hearing.”<sup>27</sup> This “longing to go beyond” implies the opening up of a potentiality via the suspension of reason

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<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Birth of Tragedy,” 115.

which the dissonant form induces, alongside the physical disjoint it creates. The “beyond” implies a new movement, one which is opposed to the rigidified singular death of the petrified individual. Today, to go beyond means to go offline, off Zoom, off Facebook, Tumblr, TikTok. It might also mean to go beyond one's cellular self, to collectivize. In this endeavor, new online trends are needed, encouraging physicality, and a sense of affirmation that comes from openness rather than refusal.

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# Animals Sick with Language: From Syntax to Socialism in Nietzsche

Elliot Murphy

## Introduction

With the looming prospect of European self-annihilation and an increasing acceptance of the German philosopher's ideas across both sides of the political spectrum, in the early twentieth century John Cowper Powys opened an essay on Nietzsche with: 'It is not the hour in which to say much about Nietzsche'. I am tempted to concur, much for starkly similar reasons. Yet, quite like Powys, I will say something nonetheless. I will start at certain elementary positions in Nietzsche's metaphysics and philosophy of language, tracing out relations with his (mostly conservative) social thought. Even though it is sometimes said that Nietzsche simply had no view on the metaphysics of objects, recent scholarship

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suggests otherwise,<sup>1</sup> and I explore how this can help us understand other areas of Nietzsche's politics, and perhaps provide something of a rejoinder to those who conclude that Nietzsche is simply an 'evil' man.<sup>2</sup>

While some have argued that a reappraisal of Nietzsche's politics needs to be anchored around his conception of social power and hierarchy,<sup>3</sup> I will argue that a focus on Nietzsche's basic metaphysics can be fruitful. I will be exploring Nietzsche's 'identity metaphysics',<sup>4</sup> his monism, his determinism, his dismissal of traditional cause-effect dichotomies, his anti-Aristotelian rejection of a fundamental distinction between objects and processes. It may appear peculiar to try and draw principled connections between Nietzsche's hatred of socialism and his view that tables and chairs are fundamentally indistinguishable from their qualities. However, many such relations can be drawn, largely by understanding Nietzsche's philosophy of language, potentially opening new avenues for understanding the origin of Nietzsche's seemingly variable, and often contradictory, positions about social relations and political hierarchies. For example, the more politically inflected readings of the will to power can be grounded in Nietzsche's assumptions about how objects intrinsically relate to their dispositions and qualities (their 'powers'). Nietzsche's belief that being is becoming, that persons or objects are not somehow independent of their constituent sub-processes, segues neatly into a number of direct action philosophies, and an intuition of David Graeber's: that anarchism is not an identity (something you 'are'), it is something you *do*.

I will begin below with a brief survey of Nietzsche's 'system', his philosophy of mind and language, before progressing to forms of ideological terrain that appear to be inter-related with his fundamental beliefs about the structure of reality. I will conclude in a standardly Nietzschean way—by not really concluding at all.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Remhof. *Nietzsche's Constructivism: A Metaphysics of Material Objects* (New York: Routledge, 2017); G. Strawson. Nietzsche's metaphysics? *Nietzsche on Mind and Nature*, eds. M. Dries & P.J.E. Kail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10–36.

<sup>2</sup> J. Smith. Review of *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* by Ronald Beiner. *Philosophy Now* 134: October/November (2019).

<sup>3</sup> M. Warren. Nietzsche and political philosophy. *Political Theory* 13(2): 183–212 (1985).

<sup>4</sup> Strawson, 2015.



## Everything Everywhere All at Once: Or, 'All Things Are Enchained, Entwined, Enamored'

'I hated childhood  
I hate adulthood  
And I love being alive.'  
Mary Ruefle, "Provenance", *Trances of the Blast*

Much of Nietzsche's thought approaches the notion that reality is a unitary entity. He is a monist in the tradition of Spinoza, Parmenides, Eddington and modern cosmology (space–time monism). Nietzsche was a clear metaphysical non-dualist.<sup>5</sup> Reality is ultimately *relational*; a world without terms; to be is to be 'becoming', ever-evolving.

He holds that everything is *will to power*, but that, in a sense, everything is mental. Mentality for Nietzsche is closely identified with this will. As Abel<sup>6</sup> discusses, instead of naturalizing the external world and spiritualizing the mental, Nietzsche provides a profound inversion: he spiritualizes the natural world but naturalizes mentality, leading to a form of panpsychism.<sup>7</sup> If everything is will to power, then reality is suffused with mentality (in some form). He proposes the view that 'in all events a will to power is operating' over standard mechanical accounts of physics.<sup>8</sup>

Nietzsche can be read as a perspectivist, deeply sceptical of the concept of truth, and was famously sceptical about the whole project of metaphysics and traditional speculations about supra-sensible entities as Platonic forms, and Kantian things-in-themselves.<sup>9</sup> While he was sceptical, the act of thinking about metaphysics demands an intense and stubborn focus on the nature of part-whole relations and events, and indeed there are few philosophers more stubborn than Nietzsche. His

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> G. Abel. Consciousness, language, and nature: Nietzsche's philosophy of mind and nature. *Nietzsche on Mind and Nature*, eds. M. Dries & P.J.E. Kail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 37–56.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., II, 12; see also III, 7.

<sup>9</sup> R. Bamford. Nietzsche, science, and philosophical nihilism. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 24(4): 241–259 (2015); J.N. Berry. The Pyrrhonian revival in Montaigne and Nietzsche. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65(3): 487–514 (2004).

ability to introspect into human psychology and our underlying, subconscious ‘core knowledge systems’<sup>10</sup> that represent our sense of reality is perhaps unmatched amongst modern philosophers.

Nietzsche understood something that many contemporary cognitive scientists and linguists agree on; namely, that human language is woefully inadequate to capture the nature of experiential content, and is even inadequate to successfully communicate basic metaphysical intuitions. He observes: ‘That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking’.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the very design of the language faculty seems to be geared towards internal conceptual/computational efficiency, but not communicative efficiency.<sup>12</sup> For Nietzsche, human language provides fictional versions of reality, much akin to the modern notion that mental representations are *useful fictions*.<sup>13</sup> Instead of a Kantian notion of freedom (i.e., free from impulse (*Neigung*) or free to legislate one’s own categorical imperative), we see Nietzsche constructing a conception of freedom as grounded in linguistic choices. Nietzsche understood that linguistic freedom (feeding into radical metaphysical revisions) brings with it emotional implications that pertain, very directly, to a new mode of political action: ‘We have to *learn to think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*’.<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche’s critique of science seems to emanate from an anxiety he had about the (then) lack of *a science of science*, or a type of what we would now consider cognitive science that explores our science-forming mental faculties (we hear him pause every once in a while to ponder the limits of the ‘theoretical man’; we also hear him praise ‘the English

<sup>10</sup> E. Spelke. Innateness, choice, and language. *Chomsky Notebook*, eds. J. Bricmont & J. Franck (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 203–210.

<sup>11</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. D. Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889/1998). In citing Nietzsche, I provide the original publication date followed by the presently referenced edition.

<sup>12</sup> E. Murphy. Language design and communicative competence: the minimalist perspective. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 5(1): 2 (2020).

<sup>13</sup> M.J.D. Ramstead, K.J. Friston, & I. Hipólito. Is the free-energy principle a formal theory of semantics? From variational density dynamics to neural and phenotypic representations. *Entropy* 22: 889. 1–30 (2020).

<sup>14</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881/1997), §103.

psychologists' in *On the Genealogy of Morals* for their commitment to uncomfortable epistemological truths). Nietzsche relented against 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations', that barred the way to conceptual clarity.<sup>15</sup> His discussion of revenge in *Gay Science* is tinged with a kind of moral psychology, touching on the psychoemotional 'shameful origins' of moral judgements.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche's conservatism, his critique of egalitarianism, his elitism, seem to be partially related to these views on the limits and failures of language. He tells Franz Overbeck in a letter in 1885 that 'my philosophy is no longer communicable, at least not in print ... I often feel ashamed that I have said so much in public already'.<sup>17</sup> He cites 'the metrical compulsion of rhyme and rhythm' as being components of 'every language', indeed how languages have 'achieved strength and freedom'—freedom achieved through *embracing* these constraints.<sup>18</sup> One is tempted to derive much of Nietzsche's subsequent thought on artistic agency from these and other linguistic constraints, and in fact he goes quite far in this direction.<sup>19</sup>

Gérard Wajcman provides an interlude here<sup>20</sup>:

We are animals sick with language. And how sometimes we long for a cure. But just shutting up won't do it. You can't just wish your way into animality. So it is then, as a matter of consolation, that we watch the animal channels and marvel at a world untamed by language. The animals get us to hear a voice of pure silence. Nostalgia for the fish life [...] We record whales singing their whale songs capable of transmitting messages

<sup>15</sup> F. Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy, and Other Writings*, eds. R. Geuss & R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1872/2019), 185.

<sup>16</sup> F. Nietzsche. *The Gay Science with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. J. Nauckhoff, eds. B. Arthur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887/2001), §49.

<sup>17</sup> 2 July 1885; R. Bittner. Introduction. In F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. K. Sturge, ed. E. Bittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), x.

<sup>18</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil (Jenseits von Gut und Böse)* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1886), §188.

<sup>19</sup> A. Ridley. Nietzsche on art and freedom. *European Journal of Philosophy* 15(2): 204–224 (2007).

<sup>20</sup> G. Wajcman. The animals that treat us badly. *Lacanian Ink* 33: 126–145. 131 (Spring 2009).

to other whales thousands of kilometers away, but in truth, brandishing our microphones, we only aspire to one thing – that those whales would sing us a song.

Nietzsche, too, was fond of speaking of ‘the animal nature of human beings’,<sup>21</sup> being a committed naturalist in the ‘broad sense’. Nietzsche’s critiques of science did not undermine his firm *methodological naturalism* in the sense of, for example, Leiter—‘philosophical inquiry [...] should be continuous with empirical inquiry in the sciences’—or Strawson.<sup>22</sup> He read Feuerbach, Lange’s monumental *History of Materialism* (he confessed in 1866 that he ‘didn’t need anything else’, except Kant and Schopenhauer<sup>23</sup>), and major science journals. He confesses in *Ecce Homo* that even into the late 1870s he ‘really pursued *nothing* more than physiology, medicine and natural sciences’.<sup>24</sup>

How best, then, to evaluate Nietzsche’s metaphysics? Contemporary physics has abandoned the notion that processes or events require some substance (‘thing’) that is separate from them. The general categories of objects, events, processes and qualities are by contemporary standards a woefully insufficient account of the world. Nietzsche’s belief that there is no fundamental distinction (only a *conceptual* distinction) between objects and their properties pushes away from Aristotelian thought, and towards early twentieth century physics and a clearer ratiocinative metaphysics. Schelling and Hegel can be seen as part of this tradition. Matter is, now, intrinsically interwoven with temporality. Nietzsche held that ‘the thing is its qualities’. He maintained that ‘all things are enchained, entwined, enamored’; if we say Yes to joy, we say Yes to ‘all pain’,<sup>25</sup> or *amor fati*. The venerable Subject of late nineteenth century philosophy

<sup>21</sup> C. Janaway. *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.

<sup>22</sup> B. Leiter. *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3; G. Strawson. *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> C.P. Janz. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Biographie*. III volumes (Munich: Hanser, 1978), I, 198.

<sup>24</sup> See also M. Clark. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, eds. A. Del Caro & R.B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885/2006), 263.

can then, eventually, lose its own identity by acknowledging its equivalence with its qualities. Nietzsche thus departs strongly from the Thomist view of subjects and their added secondary ('accidental') forms emerging from a combination of a being and an essence distinct from it.

We arrive soon after at Nietzsche's conception of the Eternal Recurrence<sup>26</sup>, We are asked to accept our life precisely as we have lived it and to experience it as a forever recurring cycle, and yet to affirm it.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the supreme commandment is to take control over one's life.<sup>28</sup> This provides a perspective on Nietzsche's intense sensitivity to suffering, and his insistence on acknowledging (eternally) that all joy arises from pain. He rejected 'the fundamental belief of the metaphysicians, *the belief in the opposition of values*'.<sup>29</sup> What comes out of this is part of his conservative hesitancy about a radical equalizing of the sociopolitical landscape.

As Nietzsche understood, human language imposes its own biases to categorize events and objects, but objects under contemporary physics are simply 'rips in space-time',<sup>30</sup> leading Strawson to postulate the single term 'spacetime-matter'.<sup>31</sup> Natural language syntax forces us to categorize phrases as 'headed' by a particular feature out of which the phrase is composed: for example, a 'red boat' is a Noun Phrase, a boat that is red; it is not a red quality that is being secondarily attributed boat-like features. The phrase 'John ran' is a Verb Phrase, not a Noun Phrase: it means that there was an event in which John was its agent; it does not mean that there is some special kind of John who is exhibiting running-related properties.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there even appear to be portions of the human brain

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<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §285, §341.

<sup>27</sup> J. Remhof. Nietzsche on loneliness, self-transformation, and the eternal recurrence. *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49(2): 194–213 (2008).

<sup>28</sup> C. Olney. A new metaphysics: Eternal recurrence and the univocity of difference. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 34(2): 179–200 (2020).

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

<sup>30</sup> S. Weinberg. Before the big bang. *New York Review of Books* 44/10, 20 (1997).

<sup>31</sup> Strawson, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> E. Murphy. Labels, cognomes, and cyclic computation: an ethological perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6: 715 (2015); E. Murphy. Reference, phases and individuation: Topics at the labeling-interpretive interface. *Opticon* 1826 17(5): 1–13 (2015); E. Murphy. Phasal eliminativism, anti-lexicalism, and the status of the unarticulated. *Biolinguistics* 10: 21–50 (2016); E. Murphy. *The Oscillatory Nature of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); E.

that code for this specific type of hierarchical structure-generation, which is so pervasive in human thought and action.<sup>33</sup>

Nietzsche was not swayed by the categorizations imposed by the German language, and rightly came to essentially monist conclusions about mind and nature (perhaps a good definition of a philosopher is someone who doesn't fall for the tricks of human language). Material objects are *constitutively dependent* for their existence on our conceptual capacities, for Nietzsche.<sup>34</sup> When Nietzsche looked at ordinary, medium-sized, earth-bound objects in his study, he had no real problems with them. He understood that an object's way or manner of existence simply is its being-in-itself. Yet his calm, epic detachment also provided Nietzsche with uniquely acute insights into the apparent (psychoemotional) forces rendering classical object-property notions, which previous philosophers had succumbed to. I suspect that, as with figures such as the later John Cowper Powys, and the later David Foster Wallace, the objects in Nietzsche's study appeared to him as the battered remnants of some unspoken apocalypse from far beyond the outreaches of the universe and before the origin of everything, as if cobbled quickly together for the needs and expectations of his vision, his touch, by an eternally troubled and anxious force, propelling towards him discarded matter from this unseen and unheard doomsday. Those documents, chairs, paintings and blankets would suddenly all appear to his eyes as somewhat *infantile*, and strangely afraid—not of him, but of something else, beyond the limits of his gaze and imagination. Afraid, perhaps, of this troubled force; this searcher. Nietzsche ultimately concludes that this force is *will to power*; for Powys, it was the mystical properties of human perception; for Wallace, it was too much acid and black-tar heroin.

When some post-structuralists and post-modernists read into Nietzsche's relativistic notions of truth—or some notorious *truth is power*

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Murphy & J-Y. Shim. Copy invisibility and (non-)categorical labeling. *Linguistic Research* 37(2): 187–215 (2020).

<sup>33</sup> E. Murphy, O. Woolnough, P.S. Rollo, Z. Roccaforte, K. Segaert, P. Hagoort & N. Tandon. Minimal phrase composition revealed by intracranial recordings. *Journal of Neuroscience* 42(15): 3216–3227 (2022).

<sup>34</sup> Remhof, 2017.

negotiation, *à la* Foucault<sup>35</sup> in his Nietzschean phase—this is really only gesturing towards Nietzsche’s scepticism that *linguistic truth* (i.e., syntactic, Complementizer Phrase-bounded truth-evaluability) is not approximate to metaphysical reality. The idea that truth, as expressed linguistically, can relate to empirical reality is ‘not at all desirable’.<sup>36</sup>

Nietzsche’s suspicion of metaphysics and language extends further, and seems to influence his social thought. Whitehead’s process philosophy (like Heraclitus) is akin to Nietzsche’s things-as-becomings framework. Richardson summarizes that ‘Nietzsche’s beings are becomings’.<sup>37</sup> And it seems precisely because Nietzsche views matter and processes and events as indistinguishable that his sense of political agency, of the will to power, is grounded. What constitutes one’s categorical and basal properties, for Nietzsche, *simply is* one’s dispositional properties and powers. One cannot get much clearer than the statement that ‘a thing = its qualities’, and Nietzsche even adds (much like contemporary internalist philosophy of language) that ‘these equal everything which *matters* to us about that thing; a unity under which we collect the relations that *may be of some account* to us’<sup>38</sup>; and indeed Nietzsche seems to mean this in both its epistemological and metaphysical sense.<sup>39</sup> Objecthood relates very clearly here to human interests and social concerns. He believed that an entity’s basal being is strictly identical with its power/dispositional being; hence, all being is power. This, as Strawson notes, is sympathetic to Plato’s position, where Plato’s ‘power’ can be read also as ‘capacity’: ‘I hold that the definition of being is simply power (*dunamis*)’.<sup>40</sup>

One final issue of metaphysics remains, before we progress to Nietzsche’s politics: causation. Nietzsche explicitly maintains that the

<sup>35</sup> M. Foucault. *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Trans. R.J. Goldstein & J. Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 144.

<sup>37</sup> J. Richardson. *Nietzsche’s System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>38</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. K. Sturge, ed. R. Bittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885–8/2003), 73.

<sup>39</sup> P. Gori. The usefulness of substances. Knowledge, science and metaphysics in Nietzsche and Mach. *Nietzsche Studien* 38: 111–155 (2009).

<sup>40</sup> Strawson, 2015; Plato. *The Sophist*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, c360 BCE/1875), Vol. 4, 247e.

*subject* :: *predicate* distinction is the most fundamental representational aspect of human thought, and even causation itself was thought by him to arise out of the subject-predicate distinction. The noun-verb syntactic configuration has chiefly caused havoc for theoretical linguistics, but it also seems to have caused a considerable degree of mischief for metaphysicians and classical physicists. I have discussed elsewhere how there seem to be close alignments between the configurations of natural language grammars and general conceptual, ontological relations that feed into intuitive metaphysics, essentially grounded in Nietzsche's initial critique. For example, certain grammatical structures and Neo-Davidsonian event representations align: the Complementiser domain corresponds to the point of existential closure; 'little verbs' (*v*) to internal/external thematic role assignment; 'little prepositions' (*p*) to adjunct insertion.<sup>41</sup> In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche says that cause and effect constitute only a couple of pieces of an underlying continuum that the fabric of the world is based on. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, we read that 'one should use "cause" and "effect" only as pure concepts'.<sup>42</sup> *Twilight of the Idols* bemoans the 'error of imaginary causes' common to religious and moral thinking.<sup>43</sup>

It is an old lesson, but one that seems to require reiteration: not to confuse language with the world.

Given this metaphysics, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of Nietzsche's political thought is imbued with regressive, deterministic stereotypes: *you are what you are*, to put the matter bluntly.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, his metaphysical observations about cause-effect make it somewhat more difficult for Nietzsche to provide a sympathetic account of proletarian oppression, of the kind that came natural to Marxian doctrine and its intricate, multi-dimensional account of causation. Despite his occasional

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<sup>41</sup> Murphy, *The Oscillatory Nature of Language*.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 30; see also J.A. Fodor. Special sciences (or: the disunity of science as a working hypothesis). *Synthese* 28: 97–115 (1974); L.N. Ross. Multiple realizability from a causal perspective. *Philosophy of Science* 87(4): 640–662 (2020).

<sup>44</sup> J. Čeika. *How to Philosophize with a Hammer and Sickle: Nietzsche and Marx for the 21st-Century Left* (London: Repeater, 2021).



empathetic insight into cultural conventions and mores, Nietzsche's reflections on women and sex are, mostly, rather cringe, and often much worse (in *Zarathustra*, he reminds his reader to 'not forget thy whip' when approaching women).<sup>45</sup> His views on egalitarianism are, notoriously, problematic. This leads us at last away from the safety of metaphysical speculation and towards the dreaded external world.

## The Multiverse of Madness: Political Philosophy via Mind and Language

Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughing.<sup>46</sup>

Nietzsche often tells us that it is essentially aristocratic institutional structures that have provided the most robust and valiant forms of human progress. As Drochon is careful to argue, Nietzsche's Bismarckian belief in an integrated Europe (to be directed by an interbred, cultivated European elite reviving classical Greek culture) was largely directed not at absolute totalitarianism, but rather at the desire to act as a counterbalance to British and Russian imperial might to the north and east. This was also accompanied by his pointedly *anti*-Bismarckian scepticism towards nationalism, and his anarchist intuition in *Zarathustra* that the state is 'the coldest of all cold monsters'. In contrast to Bertrand Russell's fairly aggressive exposition of Nietzsche (involving a mis-reading of the will to power along intrinsically racial lines, foregoing a number of less sinister configurations involving power over oneself), Drochon convincingly shows that the form of political philosophy Nietzsche developed over his life was far from suited to being appropriated by the Nazis, perhaps being more relevant to liberal technocrats who mix class snobbery with intellectual superiority.<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche's *Übermensch* may not have been a

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<sup>45</sup> But see also C. Verhoeven. "Do not forget the whip". *Eros and Eris*, eds. P. van Tongeren, P. Sars, C. Bremmers & K. Boey. *Phaenomenologica*, vol. 127 (Springer, Dordrecht, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> B. Russell. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945); H. Drochon. *Nietzsche's Great Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016); see also

Loachian working class hero, but he also was far from a fascistic figure, certainly not worthy of the scorn that post-war philosophy departments showed him, refusing as many did to teach his work.

Nietzsche was able to negotiate being and disposition, as we have seen, but he found difficulty in dismantling another duality: being and *value*. This metaethical concern resulted in him proposing a type of value monism: there is only one value (termed ‘good’) but it happens to be ‘scalar’.<sup>48</sup> All entities may be good, but some are more good than others. Interestingly, he also at times discusses how self-interest seems not to be the base motive of human beings, and he assesses whether moral virtues have a value for the individual who possesses them, or rather for the group. Nietzsche’s critique of forms of moral reductionism (including, one might say, neoliberal reductionism to versions of *Homo economicus*) opens the way to more psychologically and sociologically plausible models of political agency.<sup>49</sup>

We arrive again at Nietzsche’s conclusion that all being is power; all categorical aspects are identical to an entity’s properties and powers. In this sense—and I speak here as a left-libertarian and anarchist thinker<sup>50</sup>—perhaps Nietzsche was onto something when he despised the masses; at least, under his particular conception of what the masses actually are: those who are unable to move through successful self-transformation or develop their own values independent of ‘the herd’, those who hold back artistic progress, who deny their own will to power

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B. Burgis. Marx was a (philosophical) liberal and you should be too. *Liberalism and Socialism*, ed. M. McManus. Palgrave Studies in Classical Liberalism (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 139–152.

<sup>48</sup> J. Richardson. Nietzsche’s value monism: saying Yes to everything. *Nietzsche on Mind and Nature*, eds. M. Dries & P.J.E. Kail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 89–119. 108.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §3, §57.

<sup>50</sup> E. Murphy. *Unmaking Merlin: Anarchist Tendencies in English Literature* (London: Zero Books, 2014); E. Murphy. Always a lighthouse: Video games and radical politics. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 9 August 2015; E. Murphy. The politics of sorrow. *openDemocracy*. 31 August 2015; E. Murphy. Anarchy and identity: On power and loneliness in the works of John Cowper Powys. *The Powys Journal* 28: 120–139 (2018); E. Murphy. Anarchism and science. *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*. Eds. C. Levy & M.S. Adams (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 193–209 (2019); E. Murphy. Review of *Protest: Stories of Resistance*, ed. Ra Page. *Anarchist Studies* 27(1): 106–108 (2019); E. Murphy. This UK general election is a choice between imperialism and internationalism. *Jacobin*. 6 December 2019; E. Murphy. *Arms in Academia: The Political Economy of the Modern UK Defence Industry* (London: Routledge, 2020).

and give in to common forms of psychological and domestic resistance, who live in decadence and embrace an ethics of material envy. In *Twilight*, we encounter the chapter 'What the Germans Lack', where German intelligence is said to be coarser and shallower than it used to be, with members of other European states lacking good spirits and self-respect.<sup>51</sup> Many anarchists have appropriately drawn inspiration from Nietzsche (Salvador Seguí, Federica Montseny, Rudolf Ricker, Murray Bookchin; Emma Goldman considered Nietzsche an honorary anarchist, and John Cowper Powys considered him a 'spiritual anarchist'), with his hatred of the state and herd mentality, and his suspicion of the influence of the market on cultural production.<sup>52</sup> For Goldman, Nietzsche's 'aristocracy was neither of birth nor of purse; it was of the spirit. In that respect, Nietzsche was an anarchist, and all true anarchists were aristocrats'.<sup>53</sup>

Concurrently, Nietzsche's apparent conservatism is emboldened by his views about the sensitivity of most ordinary people to deep metaphysical truths: 'The whole of human life is deeply involved in *untruth*', he says, believing the masses (for him, 'the rabble', the 'bungled and botched') highly susceptible to self-delusion.<sup>54</sup> In *Human, All Too Human*, he claims that there is no relation between the furthering of truth, and the well-being of humanity. For Nietzsche, science can paradoxically serve as a form of self-defence against truth, a form of moral cowardice, self-involved cunning and aggrandizement.<sup>55</sup> Or, more accurately, this critique is mostly directed at *scientism*, given his clear commitment to naturalism in works like *Beyond Good and Evil* and his regular critique of teleological notions sneaking their way into modern science. The late Nietzsche 'exhibit[ed] a uniform and unambiguous respect for facts, the

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 37; see also F. Nietzsche. *Thoughts Out of Season*, trans. A. Collins, ed. O. Levy (1874/2016). Accessed at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38226/38226-h/38226-h.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> S. Sunshine. Nietzsche and the anarchists. *Fifth Estate* 367. Winter 2004–2005.

<sup>53</sup> E. Goldman. *Living My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931).

<sup>54</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. A. Harvey (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1880/1908), 64.

<sup>55</sup> B.E. Babich. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Science: Reflecting Science on the Ground of Art and Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); T. Sorell. *Scientism* (London: Routledge, 1991).

senses, and science'.<sup>56</sup> One might also respond that this serves to undermine the moral and social value of modern scientific progress, and is akin to certain critiques emanating from modern conservative circles.<sup>57</sup>

Nietzsche's various claims about self-deception,<sup>58</sup> which for him is essential for survival, conspire into an image of the uneducated man as too unreflective, too delusional to engage in the serious business of metaphysics, let alone self-government. His conviction in the prevalence of self-delusion contributes to the following claim: The mutual psychological distance between the rich and the poor man renders the poor man's hatred of the rich man (who takes possessions from the poor man) effectively moot, since both possess false beliefs about the other's needs, desires and so forth. Indeed, since the psychological distance between rich and poor is so vast, Nietzsche concludes that the oppressed masses often exaggerate the wickedness of their masters: 'The iniquities of the mighty which bulk most largely in history are not nearly so monstrous as they seem'.<sup>59</sup> And although Nietzsche is trying to use this framework to highlight how evil can be done in the absence of any particular malice (i.e., the rich man thinks so little of the poor man that he oppresses him almost absentmindedly), it is nevertheless notable that when discussing supposedly binary camps, Nietzsche will typically direct a sympathetic light onto the powerful, not the meek. In *Twilight of the Idols*, the very notion of equality (at least, equality of outcome) was for Nietzsche directly opposed to justice. In *Human, All Too Human* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche puts forward the position that justice is characterized by the decisions of equally powerful groups, serving to reach some kind of mutual accord, while the less powerful must accept this equalization.<sup>60</sup> While Nietzsche is surely right (and arguably prescient) in highlighting how *ressentiment* and morality have

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<sup>56</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 105; see also P. Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> B. Leiter, Nietzsche's naturalism reconsidered. *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, eds. K. Gemes & J. Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 576–598.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 28–29, 89–90, 95, 107.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>60</sup> V. Jelkić, Nietzsche on justice and democracy. *Synthesis Philosophica* 21(2): 395–403 (2006).

an ‘actual physiological cause [*Ursache*]’,<sup>61</sup> the absence of much socio-economic framing has naturally helped many detect a sense of (physico-) economic determinism.

## The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent: Nietzsche’s Self-Reflections

A man as he *ought* to be: that sounds to us as insipid as ‘a tree as it ought to be’.<sup>62</sup>

Nietzsche held that ‘every great philosophy so far has been [...] the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir’.<sup>63</sup> His reflections on free will and power, in particular, seem to emanate from his own sense of resentment and personal misfortune, as has been speculated. He claimed that Christ himself was the only figure worthy of his competition.<sup>64</sup>

By denying free will, and instead emphasizing power as the root of our personal sense of freedom, Nietzsche may have undermined the centrality of defining freedom by overcoming resistance, naturally a crucial theme in progressive circles. It still seems reasonable to concur with Foucault<sup>65</sup> that the notion of a Nietzschean socialist is ‘a bit ridiculous, perhaps’, but so too is the notion of a Nietzschean fascist.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian project was an existential and cultural one—but not a heavily *political* one. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs summarize: ‘The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess’<sup>66</sup>; quite the project to undertake. Nevertheless, Nietzsche abstained from

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<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I, 15.

<sup>62</sup> *The Will to Power*, §332; Notebook W II 3. November 1887–March 1888, KGW VIII, 2.304, KSA 13.62.

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §6.

<sup>64</sup> M. McManus. On left and right Nietzscheanism. *Areo*. 19 August 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Foucault, 1991, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, xi.

commenting on the will to power and its relation to these and other philosophies when he evaluated his own work in *Ecce Homo*, leaving it unclear how to properly integrate this concept within his politics.<sup>67</sup> His considerable intellectual talent instead left him pondering topics that he gave to sardonic chapter titles in *Ecce Homo*, such as ‘Why I Am So Clever’ and ‘Why I Write Such Good Books’. Overall, while we can conclude that Nietzsche was indeed hostile to the notions of a free society and equal rights,<sup>68</sup> we need to qualify that his interest in directly applying his philosophy to material reality was much more limited than many of his contemporaries.<sup>69</sup> It seems likely that his ideas about social relations owe less to some underlying fascistic tendencies than to his admiration and love of the classical world. Addressing the problems of industrialism, imperialism and capitalism using only the language of ancient Rome that Nietzsche so often adopted will lead to undeniable limitations and misinterpretations.

It may also be possible that Nietzsche despised the ‘Last Man’ (in *Zarathustra*) not simply because he ‘would be satisfied with everything he has done’ and ‘be stagnant, incapable of growth, part of an easily manipulated crowd’, and would ‘confuse cynicism with knowledge’<sup>70</sup>—but also because the Last Man effectively rejects Nietzsche’s metaphysics: a being who is *not* becoming, not developing, the remarkably unadventurous and self-satisfied, the man who foolishly *believes himself to be a physical object*, rather than a continual process. More generally, Nietzsche’s narrowing of the space of admissible ‘just’ agents brings with it a narrow apportioning of political privilege and power—a quintessentially modern conservative ideology.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> F. Nietzsche, F. *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and other Writings*, trans. J. Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1888/2005).

<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §377.

<sup>69</sup> S.E. Ascheim. *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); B. Detwiler. *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>70</sup> C. Hedges. *I Don't Believe in Atheists* (London: Continuum, 2008), 84.

<sup>71</sup> R. Beiner. *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); see also M. McManus. *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics*. Palgrave Studies in Classical Liberalism (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); M. McManus. *Liberal*

Anarchists, socialists and Christians were all united—according to Nietzsche—in seeking ‘equality of rights’, a thoroughly odious notion: ‘United in a fierce insurrection against any particular demand, right and privilege (which means against all rights, for when everyone is equal, no one needs any “rights” any more)’.<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche dismisses the concerns of anarchists who object to ‘submitting abjectly to capricious laws’, discussing this ironically.<sup>73</sup> One might defend Nietzsche here and stress how he is concerned with how true creative freedom can only take place within the context of certain constraints, yet the ethical grounding and implications of his forays into free will seem clear. When Nietzsche proclaims that the notion of subjective experience is essentially a *grammatical fiction* (a core thesis underlying his metaphysics: ‘there is no “being” behind the doing, the acting, the becoming: “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the doing’<sup>74</sup>), so too wither away any lingering potential to centre individual rights in his system.

While progressive thinkers can concur that personal power, and self-improvement, is to be lauded, a natural addendum is that we must not confuse this with institutional power. In *Porius*, when a young boy asks the wizard Merlin ‘what turns a god into a devil, Master?’, he responds<sup>75</sup>:

Power, my son. Nobody in the world, nobody beyond the world, can be trusted with power, unless perhaps it be our mother the earth; but I doubt whether even she can. The Golden Age can never come again till governments and rulers and kings and emperors and priests and druids and gods and devils learn to unmake themselves as I did, and leave men and women to themselves!

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and democratic egalitarian rights: a critical legal conception. *Law, Culture and the Humanities* <https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872120930565> (2020).

<sup>72</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Werke IV*, ed. K. Schlechta (Ullstein Materialien, Frankfurt, 1980), 288.

<sup>73</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §188.

<sup>74</sup> F. Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufman & R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1887/1989), 45; see also P. Katsafanas. *The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); M. Lackey. Killing God, liberating the “subject”: Nietzsche and post-God freedom. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60(4): 737–754 (1999).

<sup>75</sup> J.C. Powys. *Porius*, eds. J. Bond & M. Krisdóttir (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), 260–261.

## I'm Thinking of Ending Things: Qualifications and Conclusions

We are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.<sup>76</sup>

I have claimed that understanding Nietzsche's metaphysics can contribute to the broader project of understanding his social thought. Nietzsche's system—his critique of metaphysics—provides points of major insight here.<sup>77</sup> There is insufficient space for me to elaborate fully on Nietzsche's free will arguments, which stand somewhat in-between these concerns of metaphysics and ideology, but I will here conclude with some brief comments.

First, as excellent points of departure from Nietzschean determinism, consider Chomsky's comments on Newton's demolition of the notion of 'body': the mind-body distinction cannot be formulated, so we cannot conclude that free will or mentality is incompatible with 'body'/matter.<sup>78</sup> Locke, Lange, Chomsky and Nietzsche all concur that, as the latter puts it, the idea that 'substance is experienceless is only a hypothesis! Not based on experience!'.<sup>79</sup> Yet, Nietzsche does not take the final step required here to conclude that freedom of the will is also not incompatible with known physics.

Second, consider Conway and Kochen's free will theorem, which proves that if humans are free to make an experimental observation of the squared components of spin of a particle, then so must the particle be 'free' to provide an answer on the fly.<sup>80</sup> Conway and Kochen prove that Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason is in fact false: particles behave

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<sup>76</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin), 483.

<sup>77</sup> S. Houlgate. *Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>78</sup> N. Chomsky. *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>79</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1882–1884* (Sämtliche Werke 10) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1882–84), 648–649.

<sup>80</sup> J. Conway & S. Kochen, S. The free will theorem. *Foundations of Physics* 36(10): 1441–1473 (2006); J.H. Conway & S. Kochen. The strong free will theorem. *Notices of the AMS* 56(2): 226–232 (2009).



independent of past history, and indeed so do humans. Nietzsche's 'iron hand of necessity' shaking the 'dice-box of chance' (*Dawn*) turns out to be an irrelevant framework for free will, as Conway and Kochen demonstrate: It makes no difference whether God plays dice with the universe (*contra* Einstein), random events are effectively the same as pre-loaded configurations, and so the opposite of determinism is not randomness—it is *free*.

Nietzsche holds that there is no free will, in its ordinary sense, and that nothing ever happens other than it does (no *causa sui*); although there are some conflicting statements about this in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Strictly speaking, there are times when Nietzsche is open to free will, but when we turn to his examples of individuals who are said to possess some degree of freedom (Nietzsche offers none other than Julius Caesar himself), we see that there is a clear component of power and hierarchy being injected into a more traditional conception.<sup>81</sup>

Since Nietzsche believed being is becoming, and that nothing can ever happen other than the way in which it does, he positions himself as a determinist. This also helps us return to his ideas about will to power; what occurs and what *necessarily* occurs are tautological, and so 'one and the same happening is not another happening as well'.<sup>82</sup> This seems part of the foundation for Nietzsche's scepticism of socially progressive thinkers who believe in universal projects of emancipation, if only because this would attempt to alter one's dispositional/power properties under the then-dominant metaphysical framework that one could achieve this without fundamentally altering one's categorical being<sup>83</sup>; a rejection of socialism from metaphysics, rather than from any totalitarian impulse; a replacement, too, of the worker with the artist as the primary model of revolutionary subjectivity (muddled somewhat by Nietzsche's joint discussion of the 'artist-tyrant').

Despite his reactionary tendencies, the kaleidoscopic nature of Nietzsche's thought has inspired a number of progressive thinkers to integrate

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<sup>81</sup> L.N. Oaklander. Nietzsche on freedom. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22(2): 211–222 (1984); Ridley, 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 154; see Strawson, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> G. Bataille. *On Nietzsche*, trans. B. Boone (New York: Paragon House, 1992); B. Magnus. Deconstruction site. *Philosophical Topics* 19(2): 215–243 (1991).

major aspects of his philosophy into their politics, as I briefly reviewed. Upon hearing Zarathustra's familiar voice, one often sees why: 'I love the one whose soul is overfull, so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him'.<sup>84</sup>

Another lesson lingers in the background, most vividly presented in Nietzsche's late period (1886–88). Following Nietzsche's insights into negotiating self-delusions, we might think that if a more egalitarian and just world emerges we will become quite unlike Nietzsche's 'Wanderer'<sup>85</sup> and those 'philosophers of the future' who are 'friends of solitude',<sup>86</sup> and we will at last overcome the feelings of our 'loneliest loneliness [*einsamste Einsamkeit*]'.<sup>87</sup> But we will not.

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<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, III.

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 194.

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# Recurrent Reaction: Nietzsche and the Thought of the French Middle Strata

Conrad Bongard Hamilton

So far the manufacturers and large-scale commercial entrepreneurs have apparently been much too lacking in all the manners and signs of *higher race* that alone enable a person to become *interesting*; if they had the refinement of noble breeding in their eye and gesture, there might not be any socialism of the masses.—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §40

[Perhaps the revolutionary path is] in the movement of the market [...] Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to ‘accelerate the process,’—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

Anti-capitalism and anti-socialism have become the only forms which permit a renaissance of democracy.—Félix Guattari and Toni Negri, *Communists Like Us*

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## The First Death of Nietzscheanism

Would it be an overstatement to say that, wherever there is reaction, so too there is Nietzsche? Conjured out of the anti-revolutionary animus of the Second Reich, the signature achievement of Nietzsche in the nineteenth century was—after a brief flirtation with vulgar anti-semitism—to produce an enduring philosophy of the *aristoi*. This was achieved through a daring confrontation with the contradictory dogmas of hitherto existing reactionary thought. How can one oppose Judaism if they are not prepared to go all the way—that is, to oppose its Judeo-Roman bastard child, the Christian church? And how can one uphold *wage* slavery if they are not prepared to defend its antecedent, that of *actual* slavery—without which, we are told, culture itself could not exist? There are two solidarities—the “Aryans” and the “Chandalahs.” To the former belongs the ability to reckon with inexorable inequality; to relish in surfaces. To the latter belongs the hypocritical moralizing of the priest, whose morality, whose only means of taming our animal impulse, is through *torture*.

Nietzsche’s philosophy died its first death in 1943—in the close-quarters combat of Stalingrad, in the slow strangling of the 6th Army, ensnared in the inner city by Soviet troops. Indeed: “That which does not kill me makes me stronger”<sup>1</sup> said Joseph Goebbels after hearing news of the defeat (to which one might respond—and *that which kills you, kills you*). That the Nazis clearly took liberties with Nietzsche’s work is neither nor there for our purposes—the search for a “pure Nietzsche” untainted by fascism is every bit as supercilious as the search for a “pure Marxism” untainted by Bolshevism (or, for that matter, a “pure liberalism” untainted by the innumerable atrocities of Western democracies). And in any event, as scholars from Max Whyte to Domenico Losurdo have shown, the version of Nietzsche peddled by Nazi apparatchiks like Alfred Baeumler may have been simplified—but it was rarely incoherent. Yet the fact the Nazis used, but did not exhaust, the depths of a thinker

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<sup>1</sup> “Nietzsche and the Nazis,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2008, <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/summer-2008-saving-the-world/nietzsche-and-the-nazis>.



who—whatever his defenses of superficiality—had them, points to something else: the transversality of Nietzschean thought, which seems to appear whenever there exists the need of staving off revolutionary transformation. In this respect, Nietzsche himself seems to be subject to an eternal return: like Heraclitus' river, his body may change. But he keeps coming around again and again—a reminder of the way that aristocratism always lurks beneath capitalism. And that only once capitalism is itself is abolished so too will be this differential sameness.

Nietzsche's thought is, of course, in its own way, revolutionary. That is, it is *counterrevolutionary*—not content simply to *conserve*, to it launches a fusillade of challenges against the Enlightenment consensus. The scope of these challenges is attested to by the radicalism of Nietzsche's ontological gesture, which attempts—albeit with decidedly mixed results—to undo the epistemological consensus which had become *de rigueur* since the publication of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Following a tidy formula adopted by Ray Brassier,<sup>2</sup> to Kant's philosophy we can attribute two relevant achievements. Firstly, for him, reason is not divine and able to intuit reality directly; rather, it is bequeathed with sensible intuition. With this, it is able to use concepts to connect representations via judgments. Secondly, Kant distinguished rational justification from causation. Whereas for his predecessors in the Aristotelian tradition, reason and causes were treated as indifferentiable, for Kant reason contains within it “certain concepts and principles” which necessarily condition the “contents of knowledge.” What this means is that mind is not a *substance* or *thing*—rather, it is the rule-based process through which reality is conceived.

Kant's assignation of independence to reason beyond the immediacy of reality meant that it could be seen in one of two ways. One hand, as *liberatory*—as the intellectual compliment of the French Revolution, proving that humans needn't bow before prefabricated schemas either metaphysical or political. On the other, the abnegation of veritable causal identification within Kant's thought could equally be seen as restricting the purview of philosophy—as reducing it to a set of

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<sup>2</sup> Brassier, Ray. “Dialectics Between Suspicion and Trust,” *Stasis*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016.

speculations regarding the nature of reality. The latter point was especially salient since, when it came to the question of *actually existing things* Kant embroiled himself in an irresolvable paradox, denying that “things-in-themselves” could be accessed while simultaneously taking their existence as an article of faith. This contradiction was—perhaps inevitably—exploited by Kant’s more conservative critics: for Jacobi, the thing-in-itself was proof of the need for religious faith; for Schelling, an attempt to explain this scission by imputing it to nature eventually gave way to an affirmation of God and Friedrich Wilhelm IV. Yet the most trenchant attempt to resolve this conundrum remains that of Hegel. Rejecting the idea that objects must be given within intuition—that is, within a non-perceptual spatiotemporal framework that conditions their representation—Hegel reproached Kant with drawing conclusions about the “thing-in-itself” that lacked conceptual grounding. For Kant, for instance, our right and left hands would be the same were they not interpreted via spatial intuition: they are, in other words, subject to an external relationship. For Hegel, by contrast, to enact this very demarcation already *presupposes* the existence of concepts: if there is a left, there must be a right; and so our cognitive grasping of space itself is subject to reason. Of course, while the thing-in-itself may be, in principle, accessible, this does not mean we are always eligible to reach the *right* conclusion regarding its structure. In Hegel’s view, the process through which reason apprehends reality—and, ultimately, itself—must be seen as *temporal*: it is not a product but process, the process of dialectic.

Where does Nietzsche come into this? German bourgeois-liberal thought, in the decades after the Kantian revolution, largely remained within the closed circle of egoic subjectivity—a closed circle that can be said to encompass the likes of Cohen, Lotze, and even Edmund Husserl (in spite of the latter’s initially hostile attitude toward Kantianism). But important developments were afoot elsewhere. The nascent European communist movement needed an intellectual champion; it found it in the form of Karl Marx, who deftly wed together Ricardian socialism with German idealism. By the mid-1840s, he had established the thread-line of what would come to be known as “Marxism”: that while the history is dialectical, as Hegel had claimed, this dialectic is not a dialectic of reason but of coarser stuff: of modes of production, relations of productions,

social formations, etc. Forced into exile from the European continent after 1848, more elitist energies soon take root in Marx's German homeland. Both Schopenhauer and Wagner have been tagged as ideologists of the Second Reich; while the reality is somewhat more complicated—Bismarck disliked Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism, and Wagner eventually came to decry Bismarck as war monger—it is hard to fully disentangle either thinker from the reactionary fusionism of this period, which pioneered the blend of dirigisme and nationalism the Nazis would later fully exploit (though they were by no means the *only ones* to exploit this). Moreover, both Schopenhauer and Wagner were fervid anti-semites—a sentiment absorbed by the young Nietzsche, who gleefully appraised the Prussian crushing of the Paris Commune as a decisive routing of “Franco-Jewish levelling and ‘elegance’,”<sup>3</sup> and who identified the optimistic spirit of progress that inspired slave revolts throughout history with the “Jewish press”<sup>4</sup> of his day.

Nietzsche philosophy cannot—and should not—be reduced to anti-semitism. As early as *Human, All Too Human*, he swapped out Schopenhauerian pessimism and anti-semitism for an anti-democratic détournement of the Enlightenment; eventually, his racism became so transversal that even Jews who had achieved an elevated status could be welcomed into the master race (though not, notably, the unclean “Polish Jews”<sup>5</sup> he refers to in *The Antichrist*). In truth, though, the real locus of his reactionary significance, of his intellectual import, lies elsewhere: in the ontological configuration of his latter-period work. The Nietzsche of the early–mid 1870s shared in common with an earlier generation of reactionary thinkers—most notably Schopenhauer, but also the aforementioned Jacobi and Schelling—a desire to *build around* the Kantian thing-in-itself. The optimism of the slave revolts instilled false hope that the thing-in-itself could be accessed; in truth, we cannot, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Fluss, Harrison. Introduction to the English-Language Edition of Domenico Losurdo's “Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel,” trans. Gregor Benton, Historical Materialism/Brill, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Losurdo, Domenico. *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton, Historical Materialism/Brill, 2020, pp. 113–114.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Fluss, Harrison. Introduction to the English-Language Edition of Domenico Losurdo's “Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel,” trans. Gregor Benton, Historical Materialism/Brill, 2020, p. 11.

power of Greek tragedy is in how it acknowledges our manipulation by uncontrollable, Dionysian forces without fully annulling the Apollonian illusions we nurture as a society. This focuses on finding a balance between chaos and order, between unknown and known, persists in Nietzsche's mid-period, which—with its pitting of the physicalism of the early Enlightenment against the secular theology of the late one—turns upon the need for the recognition of the inexorable tension between animal forgetting and human memory.

The Nietzsche of the 1870s, then, prevaricated in the face of regnant Kantianism. The Nietzsche of the 1880s would not. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he introduces his signature concepts: of eternal recurrence, the *ubermensch*, and the will to power. The relativist perspectivism that had defined his mid-period here gave way to something else—a positive ontology of power. There is no way to stand back from reality and objectively survey it—something forcefully underlined by the death of God in the European context. Threatened by overhanging nihilism, what was needed was a passivizing relativism but an *ubermensch* capable of creating new values, and dispensing altogether with the pedantic search for “truth.” In this context, eternal recurrence is best understood as thought experiment: would you will your return if it were to be the *same*—that is, differential in so far as the strong continue to dominate the weak? Or would you, as Nietzsche writes, “throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?”<sup>6</sup>

The importance of Nietzsche's ontological turn in the 1880s cannot be understated, politically or philosophically. Nietzsche's conservative predecessors had largely acceded to the Kantian thesis of the insuperability of the empirical image of the world; where they took umbrage was in the margins of his texts, which revealed—even more tellingly than Kant would've liked—the limitations of reason. For Nietzsche by contrast science and reason alike were made to bow before the will to power, of which they function as mere expressions. What this amounts to is a striking—if sophistic—philosophical sleight of hand. With reason reduced to a veiled form of power, there is no need any longer to *justify*

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge University Press, 2001, §341, p. 194.

philosophically. The world is shaped by dominance, not disquisitions (even if Nietzsche cautioned that the strong must remain “five steps away from tyranny”<sup>7</sup>). As such, Nietzsche was able to emancipate himself from the injunction to reckon with Kant, whom in his earlier years he had seen as the philosopher with whom one must come to terms.<sup>8</sup> Ontology is permissible, because—while no ontology is unassailable—the world cannot function without ontology. Contra the painstaking efforts by Kant to separate out reasons and causes, Nietzsche opposed something as ancient as Aristotle yet new under the sun: a reinstatement of their identity.

Nietzsche’s ontological turn had equally far-reaching consequences politically. As far back as the second *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche had charged Hegelianism with representing an unacceptable concession to the modernizing spirit and the statistical cult of the majority; socialism, which he saw as no less eschatological than Christianity, long remained his *bête noire*. But prior to the 1880s, these polemics were undercut by a residual commitment to the clarifying power of reason—if we could just be *enlightened enough*, so it would seem, we would be able to undo the era’s egalitarian excess. Nietzsche’s latter work did not *completely* break with this: the nihilism, which both animates and vitiates the will to power is, after all, properly unthinkable absent the secularizing drive of modernity. Still, by abandoning the search for a philosophically higher ground, Nietzsche produced a *general rupture* with modernity—one that rejected both liberal humanism as well as its unwitting epigone, socialist collectivism. So perspicacious was this rupture that it caused Nietzsche’s work to lack for immediate political application. Too radical for conservatives and too conservative for radicals, in the late nineteenth century the political use of it was thus rather piecemeal and ideologically indiscriminate: anarchists like Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin absorbed Nietzsche’s individualist critique of socialism while leaving behind much else, while early Zionists like Theodor Herzl noted

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt, Hackett Publishing, 1997, §38, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> As argued in Hill, R. Kevin. *Nietzsche’s Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of His Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

his “anti-anti-semitism” and framed the creation of a new state of a means of achieving transvaluation within the Jewry.

By the 1930s, a clearer political role had begun to come into view for Nietzsche’s work. The Russian Revolution meant that the socialism Nietzsche had acerbically derided as representing “the logical conclusion of the *tyranny* of the least and the dumbest”<sup>9</sup> now existentially threatened the European order; equally, the Great Depression had shown the consequences engendered by liberal capitalism when left to its own devices. It is not clear who, if anyone at all in particular, is responsible for grooming Nietzsche’s oeuvre so as to make it palatable for Nazi circles—while his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, is often singled out for blame, Losurdo pours cold water on this theory, suggesting Bernard Lazare and Franz Overbeck as more likely culprits<sup>10</sup> (though as both died long before the NSDAP was founded, the question here would not be—as with Nietzsche’s sister—one of personal acquaintance with Nazi leaders). Whatever the exact means of the transmission of Nietzsche’s ideas to Nazism, what is impossible to refute is that they exerted a considerable influence on this ideology. The “will to power” was read as an invitation to create a more primitive, autarchic society; Nietzsche’s pan-European aspect, his image of the “good European,” was used as a recruiting tool to attract non-Germans into the Waffen SS.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the aspect of Nietzsche’s oeuvre that proved most resistant to Nazi co-optation was his refusal, starting in 1876, to countenance the anti-semitic nationalism favored by Wagner. But even for this, a tidy solution was produced: essentially claiming that, if Nietzsche disapproved of militarism and nationalism, this was really just *Bismark’s militarism and nationalism*.<sup>12</sup> And that, if he seemed to retract his earlier anti-semitism, this was merely—as Baemler claims rather plausibly—a foil intended to instill

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<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kauffman, trans. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1967, §125, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Losurdo, Domenico. *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton, Historical Materialism/Brill, 2020, p. 713.

<sup>11</sup> As observed in Yablon, Charles M. “Nietzsche and the Nazis: The Impact of National Socialism on the Philosophy of Nietzsche,” *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 24, 2003, p. 747.

<sup>12</sup> As discussed in Whyte, Max. “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baemler’s ‘Heroic Realism,’” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2008.

in the Germans a similar resoluteness in the struggle against “modern ideas.”<sup>13</sup>

If Nietzsche’s ideas had only had political purchase within the fascist context, the story would end here. The twentieth century was, as Losurdo points out, the proving ground for political ideologies inspired by the philosophical ideas of the nineteenth—and in this matter, the German loss was decisive. Yet the fact remains that, at the dawn of the third decade of the twenty-first century, Nietzsche is arguably more influential than ever. This influence is best measurable not in the diffusion of his works, which remain popular, but in the impact, he exerts on the humanities as a whole. Indeed, it is a strange truism that, as of 2022, academic departments in the West are populated by a sizable contingent of post-structuralists who take umbrage at the slightest transgression against political correctness—yet have no problem basing their ideas upon a man who openly advocated both slavery and the eugenics of, if not race, good health. Such a contradiction would pose no problem if these *ubermensch of the academy* had truly managed, as they claim, to separate out the *good Nietzsche*—artistic, sensitive, anti-authoritarian—from the *bad*. Unfortunately, form and content are not so easily extricated: even if one dispenses with Nietzsche’s most egregious chauvinisms, they are still left with an *ontological flattening* that rules out in advance progressive revolutionary change.

## The Student-Subject of May ’68

How did this shift happen? How did Nietzsche—after a brief consignment to the void in the after of the Second World War—once again become accepted as one of the nineteenth century’s foremost thinkers? In his seminal 1954 account of the origins German philosophical “irrationalism,” *The Destruction of Reason*, Hungarian Marxist philosopher György Lukács already foresees the impending Nietzsche revival. Nietzsche’s eschewal of reason, he contends, reflected the economic exigencies

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<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2001, §251, p. 142.

of Bismarck's Germany—a bourgeois state that was constituted *after* the mantle of rationalization had already been seized by the socialist cause. If reason leads to socialism, so it goes, all the better to attack reason itself—something pursued in different ways by German thinkers from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, from Spengler to Heidegger. Yet Lukács equally asserts that—in so far as rationality *remains* on the side of a socialism that is still contested—the embrace of philosophical irrationalism borne of the crisis of bourgeois thought is not yet over. “Most of [Nietzsche's] statements on ethics became a dreadful reality under the Hitler regime,”<sup>14</sup> Lukács writes. Yet “they also retain a validity as an account of ethics in the present ‘American age’.”<sup>15</sup> Particularly, objectionable in Lukács' view is the effort made by scholars like Walter Kauffman to—in a gesture analogous to the rehabilitation of former Nazis so as to serve in scientific laboratories or as state functionaries—to “de-nazify” Nietzsche “to suit the purposes of American imperialism.”

Lukács was well aware then, that—for a bourgeois thought that had scarcely made headway since the titanic achievements of Hegel and Ricardo in the early nineteenth century—the rejection of reason remained a *sine qua non*. But one can also say that, in a sense, *The Destruction of Reason* arrived too early. That a Western intellectual establishment seeking to formulate a riposte to socialism would clutch to the work of Nietzsche isn't remotely surprising. Yet a difference still must be denoted from 1954, when *The Destruction of Reason* was written, and period after the mid-1960s. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the intellectual climate of the West was defined by a basic syncretism of liberal ideology plus the social market. Exceptions existed—wartime destabilization in Italy and France, for instance, had produced a novel situation in which the communist parties there exerted considerable control over intellectual discourse. But in the main, the contented character of the postwar settlement, and the marginalization of Marxism from intellectual life, meant the rehabilitation of a thinker like Nietzsche—as well as irrationalism as a whole—could proceed by

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<sup>14</sup> Lukács, Georg. *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer, Humanities Press, 1981, p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



the numbers. Indeed, for Kaufman it was enough to declare that Nietzsche was not an unreconstructed racist; that he was in fact a champion of the Enlightenment—albeit of an idiosyncratic vision of it; that he was closer to Christianity than many imagined (as his praise of, for instance, Jesus as an exemplar of master morality suggests).

Had the stability of the postwar consensus persisted, it's likely these sorts of apologetics would've sufficed to safeguard the pantheon of Western philosophy from communist besiegement. But a string of Third World socialist upheavals—in Cuba and Vietnam, among others, as well as in China, where Mao looked to the masses to subdue socialist bureaucratism—served as a gadfly to efforts to achieve capitalist stabilization. For these events were not separable in any sense from domestic developments in the West: it's no coincidence when making his entreaties to the state to strengthen the rights of America's beleaguered black minority, Martin Luther King continually sounded the tocsin of communist subversion. Nor is it a coincidence that a swath of student activists in France—incensed by, among other things, the brutality of the Algerian War—would adopt Maoism as their *raison d'être*. Academic institutions followed suit, and—aided by the considerable expansion of universities in the 1960s—campuses soon found themselves awash with Marxist ideology. Frustrated by the quietism of the latter-day Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse in this period re-styled himself as an advocate not of industrial actions but of the unfettering of the *eros* of a class largely liberated from material need. And Louis Althusser, in an attempt to subvert the restrictive intellectual confines of the French Communist Party, called for the scientization of a Marxism that—whether due to Stalinist dogmatism, or the Marxist humanism of détente—seemed incapable of affecting revolutionary change in Europe.

Public intellectuals such as Marcuse and Althusser aided, undoubtedly, in helping legitimize Marxism within the academy. This very legitimization, however, was incumbent upon a partial rejection of the centrality of working class struggle. For Marcuse, the mistake of Orthodox Marxism had been to focus on the proletariat at the expense of other sites of struggle—while a worker may chafe at their paltry wages, one shouldn't underestimate the travails of single mothers in the Midwest, or of students whose partial liberation from the immediate demands of capital

allows them to see beyond its structure. Althusser was—partly due to his desire to remain within the sclerotically Stalinist French Communist Party—decidedly more circumspect in his departure from Marxist orthodoxy. He did not, like Marcuse, dismiss the significance of anti-colonial struggle, or foreground the student movement. His subversion was a subtler one. The residually dialectical aspect of Marx's work, he argued, is apparent in the tendency of Marxists to see revolution as arising from the purification of contradiction—if the contradiction between Capital and Labor reaches its climax, so we are told, revolution will result. But should we consult the domain of historical struggles, as well as that of Marx's political writings, we will find that this "*purified* schema"<sup>16</sup> almost never corresponds with reality. The Russian Revolution occurred, for instance, not because Russia's contradictions had been distilled to the Capital–Labor dyad, but because they were so multifarious (proletarianized cities vs. the feudal countryside, liberal bourgeoisie vs. Tsar, etc.). In this sense, the Marxist contradiction can be said to be—to use a term favored by Freud—"overdetermined": if a significant event should occur, it will invariably owe to a "tangle"<sup>17</sup> of internal and external contradictions. These contradictions can never be explained away purely as consequences of the "economic dialectic."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, while the economic paradigm may have some descriptive value—we do live under capitalism, after all—the moment of "the lonely hour of the 'last instance'", of its simple determination, "never comes."<sup>19</sup>

It would be quite beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to qualitatively assess the innovations introduced into the Marxist tradition by Marcuse and Althusser. What is clear in any event is that the work of both of these thinkers corresponds with a specific historical conjuncture. The shift in the West to an economy in which continued industrial employment was accompanied by the growth of bureaucratic and consumer sectors, coupled with the enrollment of more youths than ever before in post-secondary education, meant that—if revolution

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<sup>16</sup> Althusser, Louis. "Contradiction and Overdetermination," In *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, 2005, p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

were to happen—it would need to draw support from a diverse cross-section of social groups. For Marcuse, this meant a break with Orthodox Marxism. For Althusser, it served as a consummation of it: revolution, after all, *never* proceeds along a tidy, pre-defined pathway. Yet in their own ways, both made room for what could be called the “student-subject” in the new revolutionary vanguard. This is unambiguous in the case of Marcuse: he saw the students, after all, as an avant-garde who must educate the workers. For Althusser, it must be read off the premises of his work. If revolution does not conform with any kind of productivist *telos*, then what is needed is a “Marxist science” capable of understanding how different elements and productive processes interact within a complexly structured social formation. As science is not self-evident—as it does not issue directly from experience, but requires mediating concepts—this necessitates the cultivation of a class of thinkers capable of theoretically elucidating popular movements.

Regardless of their differences, then, both Marcuse and Althusser sought in different ways to construct a *fusion of working class and petit-bourgeois forces* capable of bringing about revolution. Such a vision is not without precedent: it has been advocated by Marxists unsuccessfully (Kautsky) as well as successfully (Lenin). But the relative demographic weight of “middle strata” youth among those calling for change in the West in the 1960s created new tensions. The diversification of the consumer environment in this period meant that, if Marxism were to triumph, it would need to be severely reconfigured. No longer would it suffice to provide simple material guarantees—of housing security of full employment. To a large extent—and so far as the middle strata were concerned—these guarantees *already existed*, as part of the postwar settlement. The question thus became (1) how this prosperity could be extended to segments of the population which had only benefitted *indirectly* or *reservedly* from these gains—women, minorities, etc., and (2) how an ill-defined utopian society could be realized that, while building on consumerism, freed libidinal desires from their attachment to fetishized commodities. In the French context, this tension—between socialism and consumerism—was captured by Jean-Luc Godard in a text panel in his 1966 *Masculin féminin*—a slice of pop Marxism about a naïve would-be revolutionary who pursues a budding ye-ye star.

“This film could also be called,” it reads, “The children of Marx and Coca-Cola.”

According to popular cliché, the uprisings of May '68—as an aborted trial run for the worker–student coalition—confirmed the victory of Coca-Cola. While this is true, it must be stated that this was not simply a question of *staving off revolution* as to *safeguard political continuity*. The protests began inauspiciously. In April 1968, students at the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris—incensed of all things at dormitory restrictions which obstructed having sex, but in any case, deeply endowed with Third Worldist (including Maoist) convictions, as well as deeply appalled by wars in Algeria and Vietnam—began staging protests. Fearing an irreversible destabilization of the newfangled Nanterre campus, the French government made a rather fateful decision: they shuttered it. The protesters then migrated en masse to the city center, the Latin Quarter, where—after having been beaten and bludgeoned by police on May 11—what many thought unthinkable happened: much of the nation joined in supporting them. Two of France's largest labor unions, the CGT and CGT-FO, called for a one-day general strike. Workers did them one better—France was rocked by the biggest wildcat strikes in its history the following days. De Gaulle slunk off in secret, leading Prime Minister Georges Pompidou to conclude that “he has fled the country!” Tanks were deployed to the otherwise sleepy suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux. But in spite of the constant warning of communist takeover emanating from De Gaulle and others, the French Communist Party—following a longstanding Soviet policy of *détente* with the Western powers—had no serious intention of supporting the protests. It caved, agreeing to an election for June 23. The French masses who had previously supported the protesters shrugged off the protests, heeding the call for stability. De Gaulle won a decisive electoral victory.

On the surface of things, the conclusion of May '68 represented a *return to order*. Such a narrative, however, is undermined by the fact that the failure of the student movement to enlist the support of the Communist Party was merely a prelude to this emergence of this demographic as an independent electoral force. By April 1969, de Gaulle—having squandered the last vestiges of his credibility on a failed referendum to reform

the constitution—was out of power. What followed were several years in which—in spite of a slow lurch to the right economically—social policy was liberalized in a manner that recognized retroactively the student movement's call for an end to the patriarchal ethos of the De Gaulle era. In the 1970s, France saw its first anti-racist speech legislation; during the same period, both no-fault divorce (“*par consentement mutuel*”) and abortion were legalized. The power wielded by the electoral bloc who had once been on—or at least sympathized with—those on the barricades in '68 reached its climax with the election of Socialist Party leader François Mitterrand as president in 1981. Promising to arrest the rightward drift of French economic policy, Mitterrand—with the support of the French Communist Party—initially raised taxes, increased social benefits, and launched a fusillade of nationalizations. The rapid deterioration of the budget and trade deficit however eventually persuaded him to rethink this policy. In 1983, the president of Godard, Bardot, and Belmondo bowed before the international consortium. The *tournant de la rigueur* (“austerity turn”) was implemented. The Communists, in a state of internal crisis, withdrew their support. A new holding pattern was established, whereby the French left would—without ever daring to break with it—tame and domesticate the pro-market consensus emanating out of the English-speaking world.

In the years between 1968 and 1984 in France, the vaunted middle strata-worker coalition failed twice: first as tragedy, then as farce. Workers, faced with job shortages and declining wages, accommodated themselves to the demands of professionalization—or, just as commonly, sunk to the sub-proletariat. The enlarged middle strata assumed a position at the forefront of French political life, becoming what Thomas Piketty—in a phrase that echoes Nietzsche's co-optation of the “Aryan” caste—has described as the “Brahmin left”: socially liberal, economically neoliberal. And it is interesting to note that, as early as 1969, no less visible a Marxist luminary than Louis Althusser evinced awareness of the gravity of the breakdown of the student–worker alliance. Describing the adjoining of the uprising by “nine million workers” as having “swept away” the student-centered “ideology of Marcuse and his cohorts,”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Althusser, Louis. Letter to Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, 1969.

Althusser highlights a paradox of the protests: that while “the students thought that it was the workers who needed them,” in “reality it was the students [...] who needed the most “help,” in the form of advice and support from the working class.”<sup>21</sup> Still, in light of the failure of this failure to fully congeal, the Communist Party must have the “courage” to try to understand why it “*effectively lost ideological and political contact with the students and young intellectuals.*”<sup>22</sup> Althusser does not offer any definitive explanation, preferring to put the question off for further study (equivocal suggestions put forth include the divisions experienced by the communist movement due to the Algerian War and the Sino-Soviet split). But his assessment of the students is nevertheless clear: that their “libertarian anarchism” is a “petty-bourgeois ideology.”<sup>23</sup> One that’s aspirations to revolution—in so far as it insists upon *leading* the workers, if not outright ignoring them—“are floundering and will continue to flounder.”<sup>24</sup>

## Free Spirits of the French Middle Strata

The breakdown of the alliance between the middle strata and the workers to the fore new intellectual demands. In the 1960s, the banner of revolution was lifted by students in the name of a *renewed* Marxism: of the modish Maoism of the Gauche prolétarienne, of Trotskyism, of the pedagogical ideology of Marcuse. The “betrayal” of the French Communist Party, coupled with the gradual collapse of the industrial sector, called for a different approach. Once content to restrict themselves to a critique of bureaucratic socialism, the French professional strata would now *go it alone*. Althusser’s scientific Marxism would have to be superseded. For while his weakening of economic determination represented a concession to the class structure of postwar French society, his attempts to

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“Louis Althusser’s Letter on the ‘May Events,’” Verso, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3851-louis-althusser-s-letter-on-the-may-events>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

ground Marxism scientifically, his critique of the philosophical method as necessarily terminating in idealism, still posed too great a threat to the intellectual autonomy of the French petit-bourgeois. Achieving this meant producing a philosophy that, without *seeming* retrograde, could reinstate the most traditional of agendas: the ability of a mathematized thought to access a reality in-itself to which class struggle could be subordinated. But how to accomplish this, given the way that the proletarian paroxysms of the twentieth century had done so much to discredit foundational knowledge claims? The answer hit upon was counterintuitive. But it was no less effective for it: essentially, to argue that relativism is not just *epistemic*, but part of the a priori structure of reality—a reality that Marxism, with its monolithic political drive, could never grasp. In this endeavor, the writings of Nietzsche—a thinker who Lukács describes as engaged in a “continuous polemic against Marxism and socialism,” in spite of having “never read a single line of Marx and Engels”<sup>25</sup>—proved essential.

The origins of the French Nietzsche revival are somewhat complicated. By the late 1930s, the official Nietzschebild of the Nazi Party was under siege. In Germany, Martin Heidegger deployed Nietzsche to draw a dividing line between a “good” and “bad” National Socialism; first, by re-interpreting eternal recurrence as a moment of disruption which dislodges any kind of political *reductio*; later, by openly deriding Nietzsche’s ontologization of power as an evacuation of the task of philosophy. Meanwhile in France, Georges Bataille—a fellow traveler of the Surrealists—published an article crucial to the French re-evaluation of Nietzsche. Titled “Nietzsche and the Fascists” and appearing in the second issue of the historic review *Acéphale*, in it Bataille heaps scorn on all those he sees as guilty with having besmirched Nietzsche with spurious interpretation. Nietzsche’s sister—our would-be Judas—is singled out for blame. So too are a surfeit of other fascist ideologues, from Baemler to Alfred Rosenberg, who Bataille reproaches with introducing into Nietzsche’s work an opportunistic racial animus. Dismissing Lukács’ critiques of Nietzsche as proof of his Stalinist senescence, Bataille puts forth here the fulcrum of that will guide the latter-day Nietzschean

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<sup>25</sup> Lukács, Georg. *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer, Humanities Press, 1981, p. 313.

resurgence: the idea that Nietzsche is *beyond politics*. Nietzsche is neither “left” nor “right”—his rejection of both rationalism and the rites of the past insures this. Rather, he addresses himself to all “free spirits, incapable of letting themselves be used”<sup>26</sup>—and is thus anathema to statism in all its forms.

Had World War II ended differently—had the 20 July plot succeeded, or had the Nazis otherwise managed to extricate themselves from the conflict—it’s possible that Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche would’ve emerged as the pre-eminent one. But the routing of the Nazis by the Red Army insured that there was effectively no political need for a Nazism purified of Hitlerian excesses. It was thus the reading of Bataille that proved most influential within European intellectual climate that, after the defeat of Germany, became centered in Paris. Enamoured with Nietzsche’s view of waste as “necessary consequence [...] of the growth of life,”<sup>27</sup> as well as with Freud’s assertion of the need to liberate libidinal energy from pre-fixed objects, Bataille’s work in this period developed upon his earlier notion of “base materialism”: of materialism of excrescence, that undercuts the shopworn idealist/materialist divide. The big toe, for instance, is looked down upon by man in favor of his higher faculties—reason, consciousness, knowledge. But is it not the big toe that, by allowing man to stand upright, enables the use of all these? Implicit in Bataille’s argument is that one cannot dispense with either the “higher” or “lower” parts of our body—one cannot simply revert to crawling on all fours, just as they cannot walk with thoughts.<sup>28</sup> Initially, this opposition to polarity was leveraged by Bataille *in support of Marxism*: as an argument for the spontaneism rather than the creation of a top-down dictatorship of the proletariat. After World War II, however, Bataille—in a cynical confirmation of Lukács’ diagnostic of Nietzscheanism as a foil for U.S. imperialism—shifted to an equivocal

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<sup>26</sup> Bataille, Georges. “Nietzsche and the Fascists,” In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr., University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 184.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kauffman, trans. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1967, §40, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> The summary here is partly derived from Noys, Benjamin. “Georges Bataille’s Base Materialism,” *Cultural Values*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1998, pp. 499–517.



embrace of the European Recovery Program. Marxism, he argued, was no more than a consummation of Calvin—what it really wants is to rid the world of its abject element. Bataille called for something else: not the elimination of excess, but its effective redistribution, so that social expenditure takes the form of the indigenous Potlatch rather than the immoderate four-carat diamond ring. That this argument served as a defense of Keynesian mass consumerism was obvious, not leastly to Bataille. “The possibility of pursuing growth is itself subordinated to giving,” he writes in 1949’s *The Accursed Share*. “The industrial development of the entire world demands of Americans that they lucidly grasp the necessity [...] of having a margin of profitless operations.”<sup>29</sup>

A Nietzsche beyond politics, therefore, was *immediately applied to political purposes at the conclusion of the war*. And unbeknownst to him given his death in 1962, Bataille had succeeded in hitting upon what proved to be an enduring formula. During the politically tumultuous period from 1960–80, certain members of the French middle strata sided conspicuously with either the bourgeois or proletariat—the Communist Party, one must remember, exerted a high degree of influence over the post-secondary sector in this time. Yet, on the whole and as a class, the middle strata felt themselves to be exogenous to this struggle: they did not want the governance of patriarchal vestiges any more than they wanted to jettison an Americanized political order from which they’d profited handsomely in the form of interclass wealth transfers (even if “Gaullism” itself is difficult to envision having without the prodigious efforts of French communists in their wartime resistance). Nothing could be more germane to this desire for an *escape from class conflict* than the image of Nietzsche as a thinker *beyond class*. And so an intellectual myth was erected, according to which Nietzsche was not—as Lukács observes—a critic of Bismarck *from the right*, but an enlightened opponent of vulgar materialism. In the decade following Bataille’s death, the “Nietzsche Renaissance”—while not yet formulated as an explicit *political alternative* to Marxism—was in full swing. Nietzsche’s perspectivism played a crucial role in the formation of Derridean deconstruction, which

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<sup>29</sup> Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I: Consumption*, Zone Books, 1988, pp. 25–26.

took Nietzsche to his apotheosis by dispensing with the ontologization power in favor of “a world of signs [...] without truth.”<sup>30</sup> Foucault applied the criterion power as a means of explaining epistemic relations without resorting to technological or ideological determinism. And Pierre Klossowski—a former *Acéphale* contributor—advanced reading of Nietzsche in which the *death of God* is equally a *death of the Self*, which thereafter appears as a composite of dueling drives. But the most important text of this period is the one that straddles the line between Bataille’s death and the Nietzschean flourish which followed—and in this sense, announced this shift. Namely, Deleuze’s 1962 *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

In discussing *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, it is helpful to delineate what it is and what it isn’t. It is not, as some have contended, the moment at which Nietzsche was first weaponized against Hegel—and, by extension, against a global Marxism which emerged strengthened from the Two World Wars. As far back as the 1930s, Bataille had reported feeling “suffocated, crushed, shattered, killed ten times over”<sup>31</sup> by the totalizing vision Hegel—and looked to Nietzsche for solace (that Bataille’s first significant exposure to Hegel was via Alexander Kojève, long rumored to have been a spy for the Kremlin, adds telling context to this sentiment). It is equally not, given Deleuze’s almost willful departures from the source material, much of a work of scholarship. Where it shines, rather, is as a highly *rigorous* work of philosophy that lends credibility to the image of Nietzsche as “the *hero*” of all that is “not enslaved.”<sup>32</sup> Yet as this image is decidedly *not* that of the historical Nietzsche, to a degree that makes the attribution of rigor to the text uncomfortable, the question that immediately arises is: where did it come from? One could easily appeal to some of the aforementioned names to provide clues. But as history is not shaped by *individuals*—it is shaped by class formations, as well as material struggles—a more satisfying answer can only be sought when we recognize that Deleuze’s lauded “creativity” is in

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, Jacques. “Structure, Sign and Play,” In *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Routledge, 1978, p. 369.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Noys, Benjamin. *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Bataille, Georges. “Nietzschean Chronicle,” In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr., University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 203.

essence the expression of a class strata that conforms to neither bourgeois nor proletarian archetypes.

Deleuze's progressive erasure of the possibility of revolutionary transformation is most evident in his critique of dialectics—a critique that refines and radicalizes Bataille's earlier indications. Nietzsche's philosophy, Deleuze claims, is defined above all by its antipathy toward Hegel (something true even if, as he acknowledges, Nietzsche was likely more familiar with “Hegelian factions”<sup>33</sup> than with Hegel himself). It is in this sense that we must read Nietzsche's theory of the Overman *against* the Dialectic. Dialectic “proceeds by opposition, development of the opposition or contradiction and solution of the contradiction.”<sup>34</sup> It thus fails to grasp the “real element from which forces, their qualities and their relations derive; it only knows the inverted image of this element which is reflected in abstractly considered symptoms.”<sup>35</sup> In contradistinction to this is Nietzsche's theory of the Overman, which Deleuze paints as going beyond “human-all-too-human ways of existing,” and “manag[ing] to make chaos an object of affirmation instead of positing it as something to be denied.”<sup>36</sup> By chaos, Deleuze here is referring to *difference*<sup>37</sup>—a concept that he sees as central to the Eternal Return, in so far as the latter functions as a “violent centrifugal movement which expels everything”<sup>38</sup> which is insufficiently creatively vital (including, conveniently, Hegelian philosophy).

It has been widely remarked that Deleuze's reading of Hegel is more a composite of the views of his contemporaries than a product of sustained engagement with Hegel's works. This is certainly true: when he claims that the dialectic elides the “real element”<sup>39</sup> and is incapable of making

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<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Continuum, 1983, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> A more precise definition is given by Alberto Toscano, who describes “chaos” as designating at this stage in Deleuze's career “the type of virtual totality that the philosophy of difference opposes to the foundational and self-referential totalities proposed by the philosophies of representation, and by the dialectic in particular” [Toscano, Alberto. “Chaos,” In *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition*, ed. Adrian Parr, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, pp. 47–49].

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Continuum, 1994, p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Continuum, 1983, p. 157.

sufficiently “delicate evaluations,”<sup>40</sup> it is clear that Deleuze is channeling a particularly “French” reading of Hegel, according to which he functions—as in the works of Koyré and Kojève—as a thinker of systematic closure; of the totalization of knowledge and the “end of time” (a view which Catherine’s Malabou’s reading of Hegel’s philosophy as pertaining above all to the “future”—that is, “the relation which subjectivity maintains with the accidental”<sup>41</sup>—serves as a welcome corrective to). Less effort, however, has been invested in drawing attention to the *political conjuncture*, which informed Deleuze’s work. For Marx, the dialectic is “a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction,” grasping the “transient aspect” of every “historic state.”<sup>42</sup> Without negation, there is—within Marx’s detournement of Hegel—no proletarian movement. For it is precisely the latent negativity that resides within the working class—the way that, once objectified, they are able to see social reality objectively—that brings forth the destruction of capitalism. Of course, there is no denying that the tendency of French intellectuals from the 1930s onward to read Hegel as a thinker of closure was influenced by the dogmatic species of dialectical materialism upheld by the French Communist Party—if Roger Caillois is to be believed, Kojève even went so far in 1937 as to swap out Stalin for Napoleon as the exemplar of history on horseback.<sup>43</sup> But rather than wrestle with these tensions *in the name of dialectics*, Deleuze—even more so than Bataille—elects for a scorched Earth policy. There can be “no possible compromise,” he writes, “between Hegel” and the “absolute anti-dialectics”<sup>44</sup> of Nietzsche. To the extent that Kant revealed to us the limitations of reason, it is true that Nietzsche has a “Kantian

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Malabou, Catherine. *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During, Routledge, 2005, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books/New Left Review, 1976, p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> Discussed in Weingrad, Michael. “The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research,” *New German Critique*, no. 84, Autumn 2001, pp. 129–161.

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Continuum, 1983, p. 195.

heritage.”<sup>45</sup> But this Kantian heritage is necessarily *disavowed* due to the way that Nietzsche does not—like Schopenhauer—premise his thought upon the Kantian system, exchanging the thing-in-itself as the source of representations for the blind incessant impulse of the will. Instead, he attacks dialectics *at the root*. Kant’s particular genius was to inaugurate an “immanent critique”<sup>46</sup> of reason—to show that reason can falsify as readily as it can illuminate. If, for Nietzsche, his critique *failed*, this is because—rather than casting off reason as the arbiter of all matters philosophic—Kant merely reinstates its authority indirectly. God’s existence may not be empirically demonstrable. Yet for Kant, this doesn’t amount to a compelling refutation of his existence. For is it not the case that humans inevitably appeal to immaterial universals, such as logic and morality, to guide their decision-making? If this is the case, then God must exist—or else there would be no basis upon which to ground the intellectual reflexes we require to exist, let alone debate.

In the most obvious sense, the Kantian argument begs the question. It requires us to believe that logic and morality are universals—something particularly hard to swallow in light of the discovery of multiple logical systems with differing axioms, such as non-classical logics. It also requires us to believe that logical absolutes—truth statements which cannot be contradicted—must be immanent from God if they’re immaterial. This gesture, however—*of reason appealing to reason*—is not, in Deleuze’s view, just Kant’s. For it, in fact, undergirds the entire dialectical tradition which succeeded him; a tradition that—having abandoned any pretension to actually existing reality—subordinates “real activities”<sup>47</sup> to a transcendental metric which assigns them value. Seen this way, Hegel’s “objective spirit”<sup>48</sup> is just a fancified utilitarianism: if reason can’t stretch beyond itself, then all it can do is measure its tribute out by the degree to which it reckons with its own fallibility. So too with socialism, which—unable to countenance novelty—seeks its guarantee in a “proletariat”<sup>49</sup> too prefabricated to be actual; in the *ressentiment* of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

retributive violence (as opposed to the Overman, who nourishes himself on justice's abasement so as to *one day legislate it*).

It is in this context—the deadening impasse of dialectics—that the eternal return acquires significance. For Nietzsche, the concept of the eternal return was always riven by an internal contradiction. On one hand, Nietzsche at times explains it as the literal *return of the same*, in a manner indebted to cyclic, pre-Christian metaphysics. On the other, he was equally prone to presenting it as a thought experiment capable of rousing one from a pacified state: if there is no afterlife, no corrective salvation, how would you then act? This discrepancy, while wholly inexplicable in philosophical terms, makes sense when one situates Nietzsche in the context of the proto-fascistic imaginary of the Second Reich. The simple continuance of the past, as the French Revolution had demonstrated spectacularly, could no longer be *taken for granted*. It instead has to be actively affirmed. To assert that slavery is a condition of civilization, for instance, means something decidedly different in a historical context in which—at least in its traditional, unwaged form—it was already in the throes of abolition. For in this case, such an assertion is not simply tantamount to an ideological justification of society *as is*. Rather, it is a call to transform, it viciously re-imposing the chauvinisms of yesteryear and rolling back revolutionary gains.

Deleuze, of course, was *not* a product of the Second Reich—he was a French petit-bourgeois thinker, who came of age in a Europe that had finally expunged the frightening specter of German fascism. Thus the conundrum he faced was this: how can the eternal return be used to undermine dialectics—and by extension, class struggle—without repeating the errant extremes of this selfsame tradition? His solution was to completely ignore in Nietzsche's work the way that the eternal return served as an invitation to embrace an autarchic worldview. If thinking it is a means of affecting change, Deleuze did not want to know what *kind of change* Nietzsche had in mind. What mattered was simply *change itself*—the ability to “give birth to a dancing star with the chaos that one has in oneself,”<sup>50</sup> becoming the Overman. Of course, this still left Deleuze with a difficult problem, since it required him to explain

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

exactly how the literal aspect of Nietzsche's cyclic metaphysics could be squared with difference pure and simple. To resolve this he looked to Heidegger—in particular, his view of the Pre-Socratics as being able to think the essence of things in a manner inaccessible to dialectics (even as he elsewhere criticizes Heidegger for treating the Overman as the realization of the “human essence”<sup>51</sup>). For Plato, the unwieldiness of becoming requires that it be bent into a cyclic order by a “demiurge.”<sup>52</sup> But what Heraclitus shows us that there needn't be any opposition between “chaos and cycle.”<sup>53</sup> The river appears to us as a repetition, as *the same*. Is it the same? If one cannot step into the same river twice, this suggests that this sameness is merely phenomenal—that while the river repeats, it does not repeat the same way, and thus may not even be the same river. This is illustrated elsewhere in the book through Deleuze's famed reading of the dice throw—itself speculatively extrapolated from a few stray passages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. To throw the dice in order to achieve some kind of predetermined, probabilistic outcome is analogous to the gesture of dialectics—the desired outcome is either realized or affirmed (or—as the case may be—synthesized, so that any given undesired roll is justified as a step toward the achievement of finality). What is needed, then, is to affirm the singularity of each discrete throw of the dice; its capacity to make and remake the world, bringing about a Dionysian destiny, which consummates rather than encapsulates chance (“*amor fati*”).

## Deleuze and the Eternal Return... of Capital

The importance Deleuze assigns to difference and its subsets—chaos, chance, multiplicity, etc.—have usually been treated as *innocent*: as ontological utterances that, so far as they relate to politics, only serve to affirm the freedom thought against the twin pincers of capitalist ideology and state communist indoctrination. But no philosophy is innocent, and one doesn't have to wholly reject this reading to see the way that, from

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

inception, Deleuze spoke for the needs of his social class. For him, the Overman is the “joint product of the will to power and the eternal return.”<sup>54</sup> In some ways, his reading of the will to power is closer to Bergson’s conception of the vital than the agonistic principle described by Nietzsche: as something in “the direction of the voluntary” because of the way that the order of “the *vital* or of the *willed*” is opposed to “that of the *inert* and the *automatic*.”<sup>55</sup> Lending plausibility to this fusion is the fact that both Nietzsche and Bergson rejected a mechanistic science in favor of differentiated philosophies of life. Indeed, whereas for Nietzsche “all the presuppositions of mechanistic theory [...] are not ‘facts-in-themselves’ but interpretations,”<sup>56</sup> for Bergson “our perception [...] cuts inert matter into distinct bodies.”<sup>57,58</sup> Still, there *is* a difference. For Nietzsche, there is *no role* for consciousness—it is merely an egoic illusion, which withers and dies in the face of the perfect automatism of the will to power. For Bergson, by contrast, within duration conscious states “permeate one another [and] gradually gain a richer content”<sup>59</sup>—a process that culminates in it acquiring self-awareness. Freely blending Bergson and Nietzsche, Deleuze reads the will to power as essentially concerned with creativity; as giving rise to “the equation ‘willing = creating’.”<sup>60</sup> But because Deleuze—like Nietzsche—refuses to grant special privileges to consciousness, he is left with an odd position: of affirming creativity, which has no special relationship to the I or self. Thus the question arises: from where does this creativity derive? That is, *just what* is so creatively vital that it must return?

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>55</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, Random House/The Modern Library, 1944, p. 245.

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kauffman, trans. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1967, §689, p. 368.

<sup>57</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, Random House/The Modern Library, 1944, p. 249.

<sup>58</sup> These points of comparison, including the selection of quotes therein, drawn from Kebede, Messay. “Beyond Dualism and Monism: Bergson’s Slanted Being,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, vol. XXIV, no 2, 2016, pp. 106–130.

<sup>59</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson, Dover Publications, 2001, p. 122.

<sup>60</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Continuum, 1983, p. 69.



If Deleuze had restricted himself to authoring metaphysical treatises, allegorizing without intervening directly in political struggles, the answer to this question would remain at least partially obscure. But the events of May '68 provided him with a remarkable opportunity to expose his work to a mass audience, catapulting Nietzsche's ontological flattening to the forefront of political fashion. Among French activist circles, the pervasive feeling after the elections of June 23 is that the French Communist Party had "betrayed" the students. The PCF certainly had its reasons: if they had joined with the student agitators, calling for revolution instead of the usual piecemeal reforms, they would have risked dashing the delicate peace upheld by the major powers, sending Europe spiraling into disarray at a time when the USSR's main priority was arming the Third World. Regardless, its eschewal of direct conflict had instilled a desire among the student representatives of the middle strata for a "clean" break with—as they saw it—the deceitful idols of Soviet orthodoxy. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and his other, early monographs, Deleuze had already articulated this selfsame desire in so many words: that the concentrating of revolutionary agency in the figure of the proletariat is tantamount to theology, that class struggle is at most a secondary consequence of cosmic creativity, that there is no communist horizon to look forward to. Deleuze, however, was—for the activist vanguard—too much the aloof academic to be able to single-handedly amass the credibility necessary to guard their movement. Thus in a stroke of profound inspiration, he turned to Félix Guattari, an apostate psychoanalyst who'd cut his teeth at the innovative La Borde clinic—as well as, decisively, in Lacan's seminars.

It is sometimes lamented that Guattari's influence on Deleuze was a deleterious one, that led to the convolution of his renowned philosophical rigor. Such commentary ignores the point that, if we know Deleuze today better than his fellow travelers of French petit-bourgeois intellectualism—say, Klossowski—this is *because* of his engagement with politics. For only someone like Guattari, whose activist commitments punctuated to infinity—Trotskyism, Third Worldism, gay rights—could've rescued Deleuze from the apolitical morass he risked sinking into, translating his work into the language of the New Left (while Deleuze, for his part, rescued Guattari from auto-writing). Attesting to this is the ongoing relevance of their first collaboration—*Anti-Oedipus*. In it, we find the

answer to the question we posed earlier: where does Deleuze's creativity come from? And where does it terminate? In the most originary sense, the "desire" capable of instigating creative changes issues from "desiring-machines"—vectors of the unconsciousness; of a "primary production"<sup>61</sup> anterior to human individuals which expresses "the essential reality of man and nature."<sup>62</sup> But because within precapitalist formations these flows of desire are both coded and overcoded—repressed successively by barbarian despotism and the State respectively—they are unable to give birth to a libidinally untrammelled, new "creativity of history."<sup>63</sup> It is therefore only capitalism that—by connecting "flows of labor" with "flows of money"—is able to transform the desiring-machine into the "celibate machine of the Eternal Return,"<sup>64</sup> ushering in an era beyond capital itself.

What *returns* for Deleuze is, as such, the desire set on by capital—albeit without the blockages that even capitalism must impose as a condition of its survival. Superficially, this is not so different than the vision of Marx, who sought to preserve the *good* of capitalist productivity without the *bad* of capitalist inequality via dialectical synthesis. Marx's recognition of the historical singularity of capitalism however did not cause him to lose sight of the fact that it is a mode of production with certain definite features: features like property and money which presaged it, as well as its most important "innovation," the commodification and exploitation of labor power. The detailed anatomization of these features allowed for the mapping of capitalism's contradictions. The most essential of these in Marx's work is the incapacity to adequately offset the falling rate of profit affected by the implementation of labor-saving technologies (whereas he sees labor power as the basis of surplus value). Still, there exist many others—between the rural peasantry and urban workers, between the big bourgeoisie and feudal landowners, etc.—that surface in his political writings. These proved especially important to the communist revolutions of the twentieth century, which typically *did not*

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<sup>61</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

occur in regions where the tension between capital and labor was most developed.

Because Deleuze and Guattari reject the equation of surplus value with labor, they must reject the idea that capitalism will end because of a decline in profits brought about by automation. But they go even further than this. For them what is needed is the immanent self-overcoming of capitalism based on the intensification of desire. Once unleashed, flows of desire dispense with the patriarchal vestiges capitalism requires for its reproduction—the family, etc.—eventually destroying it altogether. In contradistinction to this are existing socialist states, which—having been founded on the false, theological premise of contradiction—are doomed to repeat precapitalist compulsions, overcoding desire where it ought to liberate it. This Nietzschean-inspired condemnation of socialist states, almost all of which took root in undeveloped parts of the world, brings their work into conformance with regnant capitalist ideology. But whereas past reactionary ideologists from de Tocqueville to Nietzsche himself instrumentalized the claim that socialism is a new religion to dismiss it, this reactionary critique is, absurdly, wielded by Deleuze and Guattari *in the name of radicalism*. Capitalism must be defended, lest we lapse into a lethargic state socialism incapable of bringing about a revolution worthy of the philosopher-kings of the French middle strata. It will be helpful to cite here arguably what has become arguably the most famous passage from *Anti-Oedipus*:

So what is the solution? Which is the revolutionary path? Psychoanalysis is of little help, entertaining as it does the most intimate of relations with money, and recording—while refusing to recognize it—an entire system of economic-monetary dependences at the heart of the desire of every subject it treats. Psychoanalysis constitutes for its part a gigantic enterprise of absorption of surplus value. But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one?—To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution?” Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the

process, but to go further, to “accelerate the process,” as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet.<sup>65</sup>

The Nietzsche quote cited here derives from a fragment written by the Fall of 1887, “The strong of the future.”<sup>66</sup> In it, Nietzsche asserts that we should accelerate or hasten [*beschleunigen*] the “homogenizing of European man” brought about by modernity. For far from impeding the ascendance of the “master race,” such a transformation calls out for the creation of “a higher sovereign species”<sup>67</sup> capable of subordinating the masses flattened into mediocrity by modern educational apparatuses. Deleuze and Guattari’s own rhetoric is scarcely so elitist. But the idea of building a schizoid subject capable of undoing the leveling affected by capitalist patriarchy *from within*—of remaining within the active space of “becoming,” without recourse to contradiction—is one entirely consonant with the goals of *Anti-Oedipus*. To accomplish this Deleuze substitutes Althusser’s conception of an absent cause for a reading of Spinoza according to which the One, the single substance, is seen as differential: that is, as articulated in and by intensive degrees which are only formally distinguished (as opposed to being distinguishable as  $x$  or  $y$ ). Negativity seizes, as in Althusser’s take on Spinoza, to be voided. Rather, immanence is lived by being pushed into negativism beyond negation; to a point where pure difference can be non-phenomenally experienced, in a fashion analogous with how the rate of change function is defined with respect to dependent variables in differential calculus.<sup>68</sup>

This dizzying pursuit of intensification is wielded, in *Anti-Oedipus*, against two primary targets. The first of these is psychoanalysis—and in particular, the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan. In the 1960s, the Lacanian “Real”—the state of nature from which we have been forever severed due to our entrancing of the domain of language—was

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 239–240.

<sup>66</sup> This fragment was likely encountered by Deleuze via Pierre Klossowski’s 1969 *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, in which it is cited and discussed—and in which “beschleunigen” is, as in *Anti-Oedip*, translated as “accélérer.”

<sup>67</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kauffman, trans. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1967, §898, p. 478.

<sup>68</sup> Parts of this drawn from Diefenbach, Katja. “Althusser with Deleuze: How to Think Spinoza’s Immanent Cause,” In *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 165–184.

typically interpreted as being a premonition dreamt by language itself: if we're capable of thinking *beyond* language, so the story goes, this is ultimately a fantasy engendered *by* language. Building on Lacan's observation that schizophrenics maintain an intimate relationship with the Real in so far as they're foreclosed from the symbolic order, Deleuze and Guattari effectively turn his work right side-up. Instead of starting with language—instead of, that is, providing structural-linguistic rationalizations for Freud's postulates—they start with the Real. Desire is not an imaginary force produced by a structural “lack”; it is a productive force in the world, a world produced by a “desiring-production” that—like the will to power—forges what we understand to be reality. The failure of psychoanalysis lies in its inability to recognize the formative status of desire, and thus to adequately contextualize its key concepts: the Oedipus complex, for instance, is not for Deleuze and Guattari universal and predeterminate; instead, it has a social origin—namely in the way that the phallic function assigned to the tributary despot migrates into the nuclear family with the division of production and social reproduction characteristic of capitalism.

The explanation of social changes via desire, and desire via social changes, points to one of the core theoretical gestures of *Anti-Oedipus*—the idea that labor power (“social-production”) and libido (“desiring-production”) are not truly extricable, even if they *appear to be* under capitalism due to the separation of public and private spheres. It's for this reason why Deleuze and Guattari are able to claim to have discovered—in what amounts to a clear contravention of Marxist axiomatics—a form of “production *in general and without distinction*.”<sup>69</sup> This conception of “production *in general*” is brought to bear upon the second target of *Anti-Oedipus*—Marxism. Marxist economists, Deleuze and Guattari contend, have devoted disproportionate attention to the idea of a generalized capitalist “mode of production,” and to “the theory of money as the general equivalent.”<sup>70</sup> This has resulted in a failure to recognize the way that the capitalism of today is not dependent on the exploitation of

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<sup>69</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 302.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

labor power—financialization insures that operating profits often have little bearing on the success of enterprises; and anyway, one needn't do more than endure a tranche of television ads to realize that clocking in isn't the only way to subordinate oneself to capital. We should thus understand the tendency of the rate of profit to fall—Marx's theory by which the progressive replacement of surplus value-producing laborers by non-surplus value-producing machines engenders the collapse of capitalism—not as *external* to capitalism, but as *immanent* to it; as subject to constant re-negotiation as a condition of its continuance. Of course, all this raises the question: what is the revolutionary strategy we should pursue? In spite of expressing agreement with Samir Amin's view of the capitalist "center" as dependent upon an underdeveloped—and overexploited—"periphery," Deleuze and Guattari disagree sharply with his contention that peripheral nations must "delink" from the capitalist center. For hasn't history shown that the experience of actually existing socialism is one of a "fascist"<sup>71</sup> attempt to stop "unexpected flow leakage[s],"<sup>72</sup> which always leaves behind it a trail of violence? Perhaps our only option then is to deepen the freeing of desiring-production affected by a historically climatic—if contingent—capitalism. Until it abolishes the antiproduktive, patriarchal "stupidity" it paradoxically depends upon for its survival: nationalism, Oedipus complex, the nuclear family.

Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Marxism is not without value: if nothing else, it keenly discerns the way that changes to capitalism—financialization, or the extensivity of real subsumption—problematize traditional Marxist analyses. But it also contains certain *serious* shortcomings. Their swapping out of the schizoid Overman with socialism, their yoking together of delinking with fascism, is based on a caricature of "actually existing" socialist states as being interminable bloodbaths. While there's clearly a kernel of truth to this, one shouldn't ignore the fact that without recourse to these extreme measures, very few peripheral nations ever even *reached* the point where anything like the libidinal

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<sup>71</sup> This is reference to Deleuze's conflation of Amin's delinking with fascism in the above cited quote.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

“deterritorialization” affected by late capitalism was possible.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, as Samir Amin points out, the frequent opposition between “central planning” and “freedom of the market”<sup>74</sup> is a false one: if China’s embrace of markets sans the primacy of private enterprise has been successful, this wouldn’t have been imaginable absent “the economic, political and social bases constructed in the course of the preceding period”<sup>75</sup> (in which respect Deleuze and Guattari, for all their disdain of teleology, end up strangely complicit with its liberal-capitalist variant). Moreover, the economic analysis of *Anti-Oedipus*, which stresses the independence of banking capital, is severely confused. Deleuze and Guattari want to wed together the work of two economists who engage with the subject of financialization—Suzanne de Brunhoff and Bernard Schmitt. But the marriage is never an amorous one. De Brunhoff’s retention of the link between labor and value alerts her to the probability of future dematerialized speculative bubbles; Schmitt’s view of money creation as creation “*ex nihilo*” does not—instead, we get the usual post-Keynesian arrogances. By the time of the “sequel” to *Anti-Oedipus*, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari would shift decisively in the direction of Schmitt.<sup>76</sup> The global economy went another way, suffering four recessions between the publication of *AO* and 2009. The last of these, the Great Recession, affords definitive proof of the limitations of Schmitt’s—and by extension, Deleuze and Guattari’s—economic theses.

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<sup>73</sup> Of course there are outliers—Taiwan and South Korea, for instance, while “open” economies in the post-World War II era, benefitted massively from U.S. technology transfers which allowed them to ascend the rung of the international division of labour. But in the main the choice for the periphery is a simple one: socialism and the development of an antagonistic relationship with the West, as in the USSR or PRC, or destitution, as in much of Africa (though the USSR or PRC being *able* to form powerful blocs was also a consequence of the fact colonialists never succeeded in divvying their pre-socialist territories to the degree they desired to).

<sup>74</sup> Amin, Samir. “Theory and Practice of the Chinese ‘Market Socialism’ Project: Is ‘Market Socialism’ an Alternative to Liberal Globalization?” In *The Chinese Model of Modern Development*, ed. Tian Yu Cao, Routledge, 2005, p. 135.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>76</sup> Parts of this drawn from Kerslake, Christian. “Marxism and Money in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: On the Conflict Between the Theories of Suzanne de Brunhoff and Bernard Schmitt,” *Parrhesia*, no. 22, 2015, pp. 38–78.

If *A Thousand Politics* clarifies the arc of Deleuze and Guattari's economic commitments, this is no less true with respect to their political ones. Dismissing a Maoism they once evinced qualified sympathy for<sup>77</sup> on account of its tiresome embrace of contradiction—"the most classical and well reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought"<sup>78</sup>—the duet proceeds to a series of pointed critiques of characteristically Marxist-Leninist forms of political organization. Revolution is essentially ambivalent: if it succeeds in creating new "nonorganic social relations"<sup>79</sup> then it's worthwhile; more often, it reinforces or even strengthens centralizing models (as with the Soviet embrace of "bureaucratic socialism"). The party form, while potentially temporarily useful, tends to quickly ossify due to the way that it substitutes vanguardism for bona fide popular struggles—leading to violent internal purges as well as its instrumentalization as a "fuzzification machine"<sup>80</sup> that facilitates mass control. And the proletariat is only valuable as an in so far as it channels the power of "minority" or "particularity"—failing which it will not exit the "plan(e) of capital,"<sup>81</sup> and will impose a narrow and increasingly outmoded standard for political engagement (as Deleuze and Guattari quote from an unpublished manuscript by "Jean Robert": "the national worker, qualified, male and over thirty-five"<sup>82</sup>). In contrast to these hoary structures, they advocate a form of left politics based on the "assemblage"—constellations of heterogeneous elements capable of pursuing politics beyond the capital/labor binary (ecological, feminist, etc.), and "becoming-minoritarian" in the sense of continually deconstructing the personification of the status quo by privileged actors (as opposed to advocating for the interests of a simple numerical minority—Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, see women as a minority in spite of being more numerous than men).

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<sup>77</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari allude poetically to a "a home-grown Maoist planted like an anchorite on a factory smokestack" in May '68—but add that capitalism seems to be in the throes of "seal[ing]" off this "breach."

<sup>78</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.



Again, *these criticisms cannot be simply* dismissed—there is much about the socialist states of the twentieth century which is dubious, and does not warrant emulation. But missing in Deleuze and Guattari's work is a sufficient level of attention to economic or historical particularity. Yes, socialist states often embraced dictatorship. But so too did capitalist states in the throes of modernization, from Napoleon's France to Atatürk's Turkey. Without a truly global revolution, and burdened by civil societies unconditioned by democracy and the martial apparatuses of the world's most powerful nations bearing down upon them, it's hard to see what other immediate alternatives were available. Moreover, that Deleuze and Guattari should accuse socialist states of failing to exit the capitalist paradigm or plane points to the cynical double bind of their work. If these states forge political models which diverge from those of the liberal-democratic West, they're glibly charged with relapsing into despotism. This implies a remarkable insensitivity to political context: one would never guess reading *A Thousand Plateaus* that the USSR was the first state to legalize abortion or offer substantial support to the anti-apartheid movement, or that the mass mobilizations of the Cultural Revolution may not be akin to the Stalinist terror. If, on the other hand, they are the features of Western capitalism—its productivism or thinly disguised patriarchal aspects—they're reproached with a lack of fervor for rhizomatic revolution (or, given Deleuze and Guattari's aversion to revolution, transformation). Thus, the really existing manifestations of Marxist thought are doubly condemned—both for being *too capitalist*, and for being *not being capitalist enough*. Only capitalism's shattering of social barriers is worthy of acclaim—socialist states are just clumsy knock-offs. Of course, they are *aware* of countervailing ideas: their nods to dependency theory show they're conscious of the effects of Third World exploitation, just as their use of de Brunhoff shows that they're at least vaguely cognizant of the persistence of the link between value and labor. In each case though these flirtations with bona fide Marxist analysis are undercut by a commitment to ontological flattening, which presses them back into the worship of capitalism: *yes, we're fashionable; we've read Amin, but shouldn't Third World states just revert to modernization theory and embrace the market? Or: maybe labour is exploited, but doesn't capitalism just overcome these crises through money creation anyway?*

For fifty years, these ideas have, with a few notable exceptions, gone unchallenged by the Western left. May '68 as a model for libertarian socialism, difference as a replacement for a geriatric Marxism that cannot help but give us gulags. Indeed, as Guattari and Negri wrote in 1985:

*It is not necessary to sit reading in a café to realize that the cycle of revolution reopened in 1968, and indeed achieved its high water mark of intensity. What was only an indication in 1917, and what subsequent wars of national liberation failed to achieve in any lasting way, was brought to light by the events of 1968 as the immediate possibility of collective consciousness and action.*<sup>83</sup>

The movement that gave us Mitterrand. *The high water mark of intensity.* One doesn't have to spend their time reading in cafés to think such things. But it would probably help.

## Delinking from Deleuzo-Nietzscheanism

We must pose here, as an addendum of sorts, an important question. It is *a very painful one* for those who came to intellectual maturation in the social contexts it touches upon. Yet it still must be asked: just what is the impact of Deleuzo-Nietzschean thought today?

On one hand, there is the Deleuzianism of the professional-managerial citadel—of Oxford and Apple Park. An infinite proliferation of speculative value, an infinite proliferation of new identities. In this setting, it is, obviously, not revolution which is assigned importance. Rather, it is the production of *creative individuals* capable of *changing the world*. Deleuze's warnings about the perils of calcifying identitarian categories are wholly ignored: for it is only these which permit the outfitting of capitalism with the civil rights model—Black CEOs, female CEOs—it requires to obfuscate its relentless exploitation (nevermind that these groups have scarcely made economic progress since the 90s or earlier). It's perhaps, for this reason, one senses a tinge of defensiveness on the

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<sup>83</sup> Guattari, Félix and Toni Negri. *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance*, trans. Michael Ryan, Semiotext(e), 1990, p. 20.

Wikipedia page explaining their notion of the “minority”: “For Deleuze and Guattari the “minor” and “becoming-minority” does not refer to minority groups as described in ordinary language. Minority groups are defined by identities and are thus molar configurations belonging to the majoritarian State machine.”<sup>84</sup> But, what if the majoritarian machine in question is no longer the state? One of the interesting things about the idea of money creation *ex nihilo* endorsed in the *Capitalism & Schizophrenia* texts is that—while neoliberalism has amply shown that it won’t suffice to mitigate against crisis—it still has taken place. But not for society as a whole: central banks have simply printed money and fed it to the stock market, greasing the wheels of speculation while the broader economy experiences heightened inequality or, as with COVID-19, simply declines. Thus another Eternal Return: Nietzsche’s embrace of the *aristoi* reborn as techno-feudalism,<sup>85</sup> as the primacy of digital platforms floated by finance—and conspicuously devoid of competition.

On the other side is the “dark Deleuzianism” of reaction. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the crumbling of the communist world, the subsequent weakening of the Western left, led a clutch of intellectuals to conclude that Deleuze was right all along: there is, indeed, no path forward but the market. These cultural energies condensed in the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit—a collective founded at Warwick University in 1995 or never founded at all, depending on who you ask. Led by a lanky, lacerating Nick Land, the CCRU’s mission statement was a simple one: to purge Deleuze’s work of its mawkish socialist residue, advocating for the hurdling of the human animal into a “new nakedness”; into “a virtual zero of impersonal”<sup>86</sup> of capital accumulation (an endeavor that led them to, among other things, challenge the “statist” and “despotic” character of mathematics, in light of Gödel’s discovery

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<sup>84</sup> “Minority (philosophy),” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minority\\_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minority_(philosophy)), accessed 2 June 2022.

<sup>85</sup> This idea that current system is a “techno-feudalism” of this type was put forth by Yanis Varoufakis [Varoufakis, Yanis and Slavoj Žižek. “Technofeudalism: Explaining to Slavoj Zizek why I think capitalism has evolved into something worse,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Yanis Varoufakis, 1 November 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghx0sq\\_gXK4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghx0sq_gXK4)].

<sup>86</sup> Land, Nick. *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, Routledge, 1992, p. 80.

that the number-in-itself can never be fully synthesized). Since his departure from the CCRU and his relocation to Asia, Land's ideas have taken on an increasingly reactionary tenor. The Chinese state, crudely conceptualized as a champion of unfettered capitalism, is acclaimed—even more vigorously than before—as an entity capable of thwarting “fascistic” attempts at market regulation. Racism is not deplorable, but in need of renewal—of being repurposed as a “hyper-racism” which heralds the rise of a superior trans-humanist caste (“think face tentacles”<sup>87</sup>). Land's attempt to position himself as a guru for the rapidly ascending far right has drawn embarrassment from those he's influenced, many of whom continue to style themselves as progressives. Yet the shift in his thinking should come as a surprise to no one familiar with Nietzsche's ideas. Whereas Land's support Chinese “capitalism” is tantamount to support for the exploitation of Chinese labor, it was Nietzsche who first called for the importation of inherently servile Chinese laborers *en masse* to Europe, to swat away the social struggles that had gripped the continent. Likewise, Nietzsche's transversal racism has nothing to do with the criterion of racial “purity,” as commonly understood. He ordains no pre-selected, superior race; rather, restricted breeding must be practiced in order to stave off the deleterious consequences of an evolution that—far from enabling the strongest—often weakens them.

While a rhetorical chasm separates them, it is not clear that the political visions proffered by the professional-managerial iteration of Deleuze and the dark one are so different. Disavowing the violence necessary to escape the vicinity of meek reformism, the Deleuze of the advanced sectors of capital ultimately serves as the ideologist *par excellence* for the feudalization of capitalist social relation. Within neoreaction, this same tendency is openly avowed: Nick Land, for instance, has expressed enthusiasm for Mencius Moldbug's idea that nation-state sovereignty should be replaced by micro-states led by joint-stock capitalists.<sup>88</sup> Faced with this monstrously myopic convergence, the most fashionable sectors of

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<sup>87</sup> Land, Nick. *The Dark Enlightenment*, 2013, Part 4f, <https://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/#part4f>.

<sup>88</sup> In Part 1 of *The Dark Enlightenment*.

the left have responded by attempting to recuperate the socialist tendencies latent in Deleuze—if not in Land himself.<sup>89</sup> But has not the past half century shown us that—if one follows Nietzsche in exculpating the possibility of rupture—they're bound to remain within the closed circle of capital? Perhaps then the “revolutionary path” lies elsewhere. When Amin wrote of the need for “delinking,” he was referring to Third World societies; how they had to extricate themselves from the global circuits of capital, which all but insured their ongoing subordination. But in one of his last addresses to activists, he adopted a somewhat different tone. While still unequal, today a remarkable “generalized proletarianization”<sup>90</sup> can be observed. Most of the population of the Global North, he points out, has been reduced to the “status of waged workers selling their labour”; at the same time, the Global South “has created worker proletariats and salaried middle classes while their peasantries are now fully integrated into the market system.”<sup>91</sup> Needed then is a “new Internationale”: one capable of waking “anti-imperialism” in the West, as well as combatting the spread of market fatalism and religious revivalism in the Global South. Is it possible, then, that a more *global delinking* is now possible? One that ruthlessly exploits the rift between capitalist demand structures and quotidian living conditions? And understands that—without civil war—there can be no revolutionary break?

To delink, and continue to delink. To roll the dice—not for the chaosmos of capital's flitting moment, but the hope of a higher outcome. To pronounce the twilight of our immanent idols. The twentieth century—*both* the most economically equal and the most violent in recorded history—already prophesied it. This is our *amor fati*.

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<sup>89</sup> This tendency is most obvious in the work of the Accelerationists, as well as Mark Fisher's related concept of “post-capitalism.”

<sup>90</sup> Amin, Samir. “It Is Imperative to Reconstruct the Internationale of Workers and Peoples,” *International Development Economics Associates*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.networkideas.org/featured-articles/2018/07/internationale-workers-peoples>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

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# Negative Politics: Nietzsche

Sarwar Ahmed Abdullah

## 1: Prologue

Here, precisely the political aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy is at stake. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche aimed to "philosophize with a hammer."<sup>1</sup> What he was trying to destroy was nothing but houses of *idols*, Nietzsche's word for 'ideals,' or "*houses of cards*," as Wittgenstein would say.<sup>2</sup> However, the first question for us is whether the Nietzschean hammer can also be observed and interpreted as a political tool, the annihilator of the modern state as *the New Idol*—"Only where the state ends, there begins the human being."<sup>3</sup> I am inclined to answer this question in the affirmative;

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, "Preface 4," *Echo Homo*, 221.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., §2 and Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §118.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, "On the New Idol," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 51.

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Nietzsche can also be understood as a political philosopher. Although this is a controversial statement, as we shall see shortly, it should be taken as a basic presupposition of this article. That is to say, the primary task of this article is to clarify a sense in which Nietzsche could be understood and drafted as a political philosopher. We must not forget that the concept of politics must be understood in Arendt's sense. I intend to propose an Arendtian reading of Nietzsche; that is, drawing from the works of Hannah Arendt, precisely *the Human Condition* (1958), I wish to draw a somewhat political portrait of Nietzsche, a new, or perhaps slightly different from how Nietzsche has been received. More specifically, my presentation of Nietzsche as a political thinker is based on Arendt's radical distinction between *philosophy* and *politics*.

Apart from the prologue, this article is divided into three major sections. In the first section of this article, which also explains why my initial key question is serious and significant, I shall briefly present how Nietzsche has been received and interpreted. In other words, this section can be read as a testimony. The primary aim of this testimony is to prove a point—the fact that to call Nietzsche a political philosopher or thinker is undoubtedly a problem. Beyond this point, apart from some brief remarks, I will not maintain any conversation with those readings. The second aims to introduce Arendt's conception of politics through her interpretation of the Greek understanding of the *polis* in general and Plato in particular. This should lead us to the final section, where I reconsider the status of Nietzsche as a political philosopher. I argue that Arendt's understanding of philosophy versus politics helps us to regard Nietzsche as a political philosopher in a distinctive way. But it must be clear that I am not attempting to arrive at a single, fixed account of Nietzsche as a likely political philosopher. Nor is the purpose of this article to suggest and construct a Nietzschean political vision. In this regard, there is nothing revelatory that I am proclaiming. Yet, as I suggest, reading Nietzsche should make us realize that the change that Nietzsche demands of us amount to a reversal of the Platonic/Christian worldviews. More precisely, I suggest that Nietzsche could be better understood in the right light by contrast with and against the standpoint of the Platonic worldviews.

## The Anti-Political Nietzsche

Opinions on Nietzsche as a political thinker are unsurprisingly different; I say “unsurprisingly,” for the political dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy has remained the most controversial issue among Nietzschean scholars. Nietzsche, an unsystematic philosopher, is claimed to be either a political thinker or not a political thinker or an anti-political philosopher or perhaps a supra-political philosopher. So, who is Nietzsche?

It is beyond doubt that Nietzsche became, Walter Kaufmann thinks, a “myth even before he died in 1900.”<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche’s relation to politics has also become a problem; his political attitude has been mired in controversy. Hence, to imagine Nietzsche as a political philosopher *per se* is not free of challenges. In other words, Nietzsche’s relation to politics—or his political vision, if there is any—continues to trouble his commentators, admirers, and critics. Daniel Conway rightly observed that “Nietzsche’s contributions to politics, and to political philosophy, are notoriously difficult to reckon.”<sup>5</sup> But, to be sure, Conway thinks, Nietzsche has not widely been received as “a political philosopher of the first rank,”<sup>6</sup> not even, Kaufmann reminds us, as a great coherent philosopher in the English-speaking world.<sup>7</sup> However, what seems to be unquestionable is that “[f]or most of this century Nietzsche’s political thought has been a source of confusion and embarrassment...and continues to embarrass some and confuse many.”<sup>8</sup> Allan Bloom once stated, “Nietzsche’s thought seems to have some discomfiting relation with fascism.”<sup>9</sup> Implicitly, Leo Strauss seems to be making a similar remark. Strauss relates *the third wave of modernity* to Nietzsche’s philosophical thought and claims that “the political implication of the third wave of modernity [the Nietzschean wave] proved to be fascism.”<sup>10</sup> Crane Brinton also makes an

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and The Political*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 1 and 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 149.

<sup>10</sup> Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, 94 and 98. It is worthwhile to mention that for Strauss, the crisis of modernity is primarily the crisis of modern political

unpersuasive association between Nietzsche's thought and Naziism and argues that "the facts of Nietzsche's vogue in Nazi Germany are much clearer than the facts of his vogue in the Germany of 1914."<sup>11</sup> In short, Brinton claims that "Nietzsche has become one of the Early Fathers of the revolutionary Nazi faith."<sup>12</sup>

What must be acknowledged is that Nietzsche was received into a culture—the political culture of Nazism and fascism, that he did not make. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche himself was aware of being misunderstood. In a short response to certain charges or misrepresentations of his thought, Nietzsche writes: "*Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image...and whoever had understood nothing of me, denied that I need to be considered at all.*"<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the National Socialist German Worker's Party, i.e., the Nazis, made up something out of Nietzsche's thought after its own image.<sup>14</sup> Who is Nietzsche, then?

In *Ecce Homo*, specifically in section 3, "why I am so wise," Nietzsche has proclaimed himself "the last *anti-political* German"; that is, he saw himself thinking "beyond all merely local, merely nationally conditioned perspectives." He believed he had been granted a "good European" eye or perspective. In other words, he could transcend merely local, limited views. Here, we can notice that an obvious contrast is drawn between a local, national, or German perspective and a more "universal," pan-national, or European perspective. Nietzsche distanced and disassociated himself from the local, national, and German thinking and saw himself as the last anti-nationalistic thinker. He fought against the nationalistic state.

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philosophy. By the crisis of modernity, and more specifically, modern political philosophy, Strauss means that we no longer know and believe anything. So, modern political philosophy is essentially skeptical, Strauss (also Bloom) himself uses *relativism* rather than skepticism. In a word, Strauss speaks of three radical breaks (three waves) with the traditional, premodern political philosophy. The first wave, Strauss believes, begins with Machiavelli. The second wave is related to Rousseau, while the third is related to Nietzsche (*ibid.*, 81–98).

<sup>11</sup> Brinton, Nietzsche, 205.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, "Why I Write Such Good Books 1," *Ecce Homo*, 261. *My Italic*.

<sup>14</sup> As Kaufmann has reported, Nietzsche's sister is partly responsible for this. See Kaufmann's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 8.

In most cases, as Golomb has reminded us, the main target of his criticism was “the German Reich founded by Bismarck.”<sup>15</sup> But it does not seem to follow from that that we should understand him as an anti-political or unpolitical thinker *per se*. Should we not appreciate Nietzsche as a good European or supra-German political thinker? Was Nietzsche trying to rescue or liberate the German political thinking from its merely local, merely nationally conditioned perspectives? The Nietzschean self-proclaimed “anti-political” attitude discloses more problems than a decisive promise to resolve his attitudes toward politics if we pay close attention to a short passage from *The Twilight of the Idols*. In (Germans 4), Nietzsche seems to be using the term “anti-political” in a radically different sense—we can also say in a more precise sense that Nietzsche asserts that “[a]ll great ages of culture are ages of political decline: what is great culturally has always been unpolitical, even *anti-political*.”

For Nietzsche, culture and politics seem to be antagonistic. More precisely, according to Nietzsche, as Lester H. Hunt has pointed out, culture and the state (a political picture) by nature, are antagonistic.<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche saw the modern State as a new, modern idol, a form of replacement of the old idol, say, of a god or church. He, placed in the mouth of *Zarathustra*, rejected the idea of the modern state, which Nietzsche himself describes as a centralized State—“I, the state, am the people.”<sup>17</sup> For Nietzsche, the modern, centralized state, “the name of the coldest of all cold monsters,” means “the death of peoples.” Thus, Nietzsche asserts that “[o]nly where the state ends, there begins the human being”; only where the state ends, the rainbow and the bridges of the overman” appears.<sup>18</sup> It is only under this condition that the over-human can arise. Let us end this section by acknowledging, as Hunt reminds us, that Nietzsche’s view of the state could be best unearthed by contrast with and

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<sup>15</sup> Golomb, “Will to Power,” 547.

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, “Politics and Anti Politics: Nietzsche’s View of the State,” 456.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, “On the New Idol,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 48 and 51.

against the standpoint of Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Nietzsche rejected the idea of the state partly due to Burckhardt's influence. Burckhardt, to whom Nietzsche dedicated his *Human, All Too Human*, once stated that "there came into being the modern centralized State, dominating and determining culture, worshiped as a god and ruling like a sultan."<sup>20</sup> However, the Nietzschean anti-political and anti-state remarks are perhaps more in favor of those who have read him as an anti-political or unpolitical philosopher. Let us push this concern further by providing a synopsis of various readings of Nietzsche.

## Various Political Sketches of Nietzsche

Here, I will sketch various readings of Nietzsche, whether as a political thinker, an anti-political thinker, a super-political thinker, or an archi-political thinker. As I mentioned in the introduction, this short survey aims to prove a point; the point is to call Nietzsche a political philosopher or thinker is undoubtedly a problem. Beyond this assertion and apart from some brief remarks, I will not maintain any conversation with those readings.

In a short article, "Is Nietzsche a Political Thinker?" Martha Nussbaum wonders whether we should take Nietzsche as a political thinker in *Ecce Homo* and elsewhere. In other words, Nussbaum asks what Nietzsche, commonly believed to be a romantic and anti-rationalist, has to offer as a critic of liberal political philosophy, more specifically as a critic of the liberal Enlightenment thinkers—namely, Rousseau, Kant, and J. S. Mill. She concludes her article by inviting us to neglect Nietzsche as a political thinker altogether. According to Nussbaum, a political thinker must contribute to what she considers the most critical seven areas in political theory.<sup>21</sup> She argues that Nietzsche has failed to

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<sup>19</sup> Hunt claims that "[s]everal ideas which seem to lie beneath a good deal of what Nietzsche says about politics and the state can be found in a series of lectures which Jacob Burckhardt delivered at Basel the year after Nietzsche arrived there as a young professor" (ibid., 554).

<sup>20</sup> Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: An Interpretation of History*, 199.

<sup>21</sup> The seven areas are: "Material need"; "Procedural justification"; "Liberty and its worth Racial"; "ethnic, and religious difference"; "Gender and the family"; "Justice between nations"; and finally, "Moral psychology."

make any contribution in those areas. Hence, as she asserts, apart from arguing against Nietzsche's baneful influence, serious political theory must neglect Nietzsche and turn back to the liberal Enlightenment thinkers Nietzsche found so boring. In a word, Nussbaum refuses to consider Nietzsche as a profound political thinker. It is crucial to point out that by a political thinker, Nussbaum means a political theorist. If I understand her rightly, we can argue that Nussbaum is correct in her refusal to consider Nietzsche a political thinker if and only if she means a political theorist by this. Indeed, Nietzsche is not a theorist of any kind. Overall, what Nussbaum seems to be dismissing is the idea that, as Badiou has accurately observed, "for Nietzsche, what he calls "philosophy" is not an interpretation, is not an analysis, is not a theory."<sup>22</sup> In short, while Nietzsche can be ruled out as a political theorist, we must keep Nussbaum's question of whether Nietzsche is a political thinker as an open question.

Walter Kaufmann, who loved Nietzsche and yet refused to be called a Nietzschean, firmly believes that Nietzsche opposed both "the idolatry of the State and political liberalism because he was basically 'antipolitical'."<sup>23</sup> According to Kaufmann, the leitmotif of the anti-political Nietzsche is to seek and find "self-perfection far from the modern world."<sup>24</sup> For Kaufmann, to be sure, Nietzsche's philosophy is wholly concerned with the individual, the human subject and its self-revelation and self-perfection. In other words, as Golobm has rightly stated, "[a]gainst the generalizing accusations of Crane Brinton...and others [Bloom and Strauss], that Nietzsche was the godfather of Nazism [ and fascism], Kaufmann presented the leitmotif of Nietzsche's life and thought as that of 'the anti-political individual'."<sup>25</sup> According to Lester H. Hunt, the word which describes the status of Nietzsche's political philosophy most accurately is "one that Kaufmann— and Nietzsche himself (EH I 3)— used: he was anti-political."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Badiou, "Who Is Nietzsche?" 1.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 412.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>25</sup> Golomb, "Will to Power," 546.

<sup>26</sup> Hunt, "Politics and Anti Politics," 454.

Yet, for Golomb, Kaufmann's attempt to present Nietzsche as fundamentally anti-political—the aim to break down any constructed link between Nietzsche's thought and the Nazis, is misleading and invites us to go beyond this common defense of Nietzsche in postwar scholarship. However, Golomb claims that "Nietzsche is no less political than he is an 'immoralist'—in a very moral and political sense."<sup>27</sup> In a way like Golomb, Julian Young argues that what Nietzsche meant by anti-political in the *Ecce Homo* is that he was against "the politics of European nationalism that had plagued the continent for at least a millennium... especially... the aggressive, jingoistic, *Reichsdeutsch* politics of Bismarck's Germany— and, in particular, of Richard Wagner."<sup>28</sup> Young continues by arguing that "[f]ar, however, from representing apoliticality as his preferred alternative (being a 'good European' is itself, of course, a political stance)."<sup>29</sup> Hence, unlike Kaufmann, Young believes that Nietzsche's self-proclaimed anti-political stance *per se* is a political stance.

Perhaps, Kaufmann is right in ascribing a perfectionist thesis to Nietzsche's philosophy. However, denying Nietzsche any interest in politics—his attempt to depoliticize and historicize Nietzsche's philosophy has remained questionable. Against attempting to depoliticize Nietzsche, Daniel Conway, among many others, understands Nietzsche as a political thinker. Conway argues that Nietzsche has tried to "retrieve the founding question of politics: what ought humankind to become?"<sup>30</sup> Thus, Conway thinks that central to Nietzsche's political thinking is "his commitment to the position known as perfectionism."<sup>31</sup> But unlike Kaufmann's unpolitical perfectionism, Conway ascribes a political form of perfectionism to Nietzsche; he believes that Nietzsche is not exclusively concerned with the individual but rather "with existence in the continued perfectibility of the species as a whole."<sup>32</sup> In other words, as Ansell-Pearson has also stated, Nietzsche presents the problem of nihilism as the decisive problem of the modern age in a new way in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 547.

<sup>28</sup> Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>30</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and The Political*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 7.



which “a political mode of thinking given not just to individuals but to *humanity*” as a whole.<sup>33</sup> So, for Nietzsche, as far as Conway is concerned, the task of “great politics” is to bring humankind to completion and perfection. Moreover, Conway argues that the political perfectionism of Nietzsche reaches its apotheosis in his conception of the overman. According to this reading, Nietzsche understands and presents the *Übermensch* or overman as expressing and embodying not the transcendence but rather the perfection of humankind.<sup>34</sup> These political readings, specifically Conway’s reading, should lead us to another interpretation of Nietzsche.

Paul Van Tongeren questions the position of those who wish to present Nietzsche as a political philosopher, specifically Daniel Conway. But he does not want to go as far as, e.g., Kaufmann, to call him an anti-political thinker. According to Van Tongeren, Nietzsche should rather be understood as an “über-politischer (or supra-political) thinker... even a super-political philosopher.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, Nietzsche’s philosophy, he argues, ultimately leaves the political behind.

Van Tongeren lays out his first argument in the following way. “[T]hings appear to be political on the surface are not always political.”<sup>36</sup> This, Van Tongeren claims, is essentially true of Nietzsche’s thoughts on political issues, topics, developments, and circumstances. In short, Tongeren claims that Nietzsche more often voices his opinion on political issues from a perspective, which is *not* primarily political. For example, Van Tongeren argues that Nietzsche uses the word ‘democracy’ in a non-political sense. Instead, he uses it in multiple ways. In the writings after *Human All Too Human*, he uses the concept of “democracy” culturally—“as a symptom of a far broader cultural movement.” As far as Van Tongeren concerns, Nietzsche understands democracy as a symptom of powerlessness to acknowledge *suffering* as a necessary element of life.<sup>37</sup>

Van Tongeren rejects Conway’s political perfectionist thesis and claims that perfectionism can only be political if the indented perfection is

<sup>33</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 157.

<sup>34</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and The Political*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Van Tongeren, “Nietzsche as Über-Politischer Denker,” 70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

*still* a human being. But since Nietzsche's intended perfectionism is not human, it cannot be taken politically. To put the point in a slightly different way. Nietzsche's reference to a beyond human, precisely as his concept of "Übermensch" suggests, points "beyond the subject of perfection [in a political sense] and leaves humankind behind."<sup>38</sup> Hence, Nietzsche, he argues, is a "super-political philosopher"—or, instead, an "'Über-politischer Denker' in the sense of going 'beyond' politics"<sup>39</sup> Essentially, Van Tongeren rests his interpretation of Nietzsche on a significant, decisive short remark on what he calls "great politics" appearing in *Ecce Homo*, Destiny 1, "where Nietzsche writes that with him, 'the concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits'."<sup>40</sup> In Nietzsche's sense, Van Tongeren thinks, "politics is no longer the organisation of human coexistence, but it is in principle antagonistic, agonistic, full of tension, and warlike."<sup>41</sup> But to be sure, Nietzsche states that "all power structures of the old society...are based on lies...the morality of decadence or, more concretely, *Christian* morality," including the modern state.<sup>42</sup>

The relationship between Nietzsche and politics brings another and deeper surprise; the word politics, Badiou thinks, is sometimes reclaimed. First, as mentioned earlier, Van Tongeren argues that Nietzsche's reference to a beyond human points beyond the subject of perfection and leaves humankind behind. I think this Van Tongerenean line of argument is somewhat misleading. Nietzsche's aim to overcome humans and his reference to a beyond human does not necessarily mean leaving "humankind behind." Nietzsche aims to overcome denialism, or negative nihilism, as a historical event. In Heidegger's view, "[t]he name 'overman' designates the essence of humanity...whose essence is that essence which is willing."<sup>43</sup> For Heidegger, as Badiou has put it, "Nietzsche, in reversing the old values, in proposing the noon of affirmation over against the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, "Density 4," *Echo Homo*, 328; "On the New Idol," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," 96.

will to nothingness, actually intends to overcome nihilism.”<sup>44</sup> In short, Nietzsche’s reference to a beyond human is an attempt to go beyond nihilism and discover free and fearless spirits whose essence is willing and who must be annihilators before saying: *Yes* to earthly life—“*negating* and *destroying* are conditions of saying *Yes*.”<sup>45</sup> This is undoubtedly a radical call for a transition from negation and destruction to the noon of affirmation and creation of the earthly world.

In the draft of a letter to Brandes from December 1888, Nietzsche describes his philosophical battle as “great politics.”<sup>46</sup> According to Badiou, the Nietzschean great politics, essentially an anti-philosophical act, intends to “revolutionise the whole of humanity [rather than leave humankind behind] at a more radical level than that of the calculations of politics.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Badiou bases his understanding of Nietzsche’s aim to overcome nihilism on a crucial distinction between the archi-political or great politics and the calculations of politics. However, Badiou likes to call the Nietzschean great politics or anti-philosophical act, which aims at “breaking the history of the world in two [the world of negation or denialism and the world of affirmation],” a “Nietzschean archi-political,” which, Badiou thinks is “the discovery of a non-Christian explosive.”<sup>48</sup> In a nutshell, Badiou argues that the logic of Nietzsche’s archi-politics is not to find or lay out a “foundation for politics.” Rather, the logic is a “logic of rivalry.” That is, “the historical explosion of the Nietzschean archi-politics is to show that “the political revolution proper has not been genuine.” What follows from this, as Badiou argues, is that in Nietzschean archi-politics, “the word politics is sometimes reclaimed and validated, and sometimes depreciated.”<sup>49</sup> Generally, I am more sympathetic to this reading. However, this brings us closer to the final section, putting this Badiouian–Nietzschean anti-philosophical act or archi-politics in an Arendtian context.

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<sup>44</sup> Badiou, “Who Is Nietzsche?” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, “Density 4,” *Echo Homo*, 328.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted from Badiou’s “Who Is Nietzsche?” 4.

<sup>47</sup> Badiou, “Who Is Nietzsche?” 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 and 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

## 3

## Hannah Arendt: The Political

To draw an Arendtian political sketch of Nietzsche, perhaps a different portrait (slightly different from other readings), we need to construct and introduce Arendt's conception of politics. We must try to get closer to understanding a sense in which the concept of politics can be reclaimed, and for this, we turn to Arendt's account of politics, or the political. Since Arendt understands the political in opposition to the philosophical, we must clearly understand both concepts.

Indeed, Plato, one of the main rivals of Nietzsche, is pivotal to Arendt's understanding of politics. Before spelling out Arendt's conception of politics, we must begin our inquiry with a brief return to Plato for two primary reasons: one is related to Arendt and the other to Nietzsche. The first reason is that Arendt introduces and establishes her concept of politics mainly by returning to the Greeks and partly by returning to Plato. Therefore, a brief report of specific key ideas of Plato, through an elaboration of his allegory of the cave, is vital here. The second reason is that Nietzsche believed Platonism was not faithful to the earthly home. He has explicitly declared and directed his polemical and prophetic thoughts against Plato. Against Plato and Platonism (also Christianity), we are called to seek ourselves, **remain faithful to the earth, and regard other-worldly hopes as illusions.** In a word, Nietzsche understood his own philosophy, Arendt thinks, as "inverted Platonism."<sup>50</sup>

## The Genesis of the Conflict Between Philosophy and Politics

First, it must be said that the Greek word *hypotonia*, as Johnathan Lear has reported, is correctly translated as "allegory," which means the "under-thought." It means the more profound or the hidden meaning

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<sup>50</sup> Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," 29.

that lies at the bottom, say, “of a thing.”<sup>51</sup> Then, the question needs to be asked: what is the hidden meaning that lies at the bottom of Plato’s allegory of the cave? What is left unsaid in what Plato says is undoubtedly open to numerous interpretations. However, for our purposes, we are focusing *more* on Arendt’s political understanding of it—“Plato’s elevation of the idea of the good to the highest place in the realm of ideas, the idea of ideas, occurs in the cave allegory and must be understood in this political context.”<sup>52</sup> Second, according to Arendt, the cave allegory essentially embodies Plato’s escape from politics. Third, the cave allegory in Plato’s *Republic* has unquestionably dominated Western metaphysics.<sup>53</sup> Thus, interpreting it should lead us to the root of Western metaphysics. Fourth, we must also not neglect that Plato, as both Arendt and Heidegger have pointed out, locates the “ordinary life on earth” or “the situation of the human being in *everydayness*” in a cave.<sup>54</sup> In a word, Plato’s cave, as Simone Weil also affirms, is “the world,” the everyday world, a world of mere shadowy appearances.<sup>55</sup>

Philosophically speaking, this shadowy world, Plato thought, is a world that constantly vanishes with the effort to make it present genuinely. Plato believed that the sensory disclosure of the actual reality of the world must be illusions. The point is that our senses in themselves and common sense were regarded as a constant source of error and delusion. To be sure, the epistemological stance of Plato came under the compulsion of wonder (*thaumatin*), and he had to renounce mere opinion (*doxa*), sense perception, common sense, and social and political conventions to disclose an independent, actual reality lying beyond or above the cave.

In other words, unlike the Leibnizian simple *monad*, the Platonic cave world is not *windowless*; there is a stairway, which is supposed to lead the cave-dwellers, who are chained before a screen to a clear sky lying beyond and above the cave. The stairway or the passage links two worlds; that is, Plato places the cave-dwellers, notably the philosopher, in-between two

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<sup>51</sup> Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness*, 208.

<sup>52</sup> Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 77.

<sup>53</sup> Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Reminder of Life*, 155.

<sup>54</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 292 and Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 105–6.

<sup>55</sup> Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 219.

worlds, in Kant's terminology, between the "two standpoints" or worlds, the sensible versus the intelligible world.<sup>56</sup> Arendt calls this: a tragedy—"Being still a mortal man, [the liberated or unchained philosopher] does not belong and cannot remain here [outside the world of the cave, i.e., in the clear sky, a landscape without things and human beings] but must return to the cave [to the realm of appearances] as his earthly home, and yet in the cave, he can no longer feel at home."<sup>57</sup> However, the return of the liberated philosopher to the cave with the hope of liberating, awakening, or unfreezing its shackled, confused, and frozen inhabitants, as far as the story of the cave goes, results in a failure of the return of the philosopher and the possibility of his death.

For Arendt, philosophy stands counterposed to politics. Plato's despair at the failure of the philosopher's return, and more specifically the death of Socrates, which is his despair at politics, as Arendt underscores, forced a philosophical turn, a turn to the eternal or what she calls; *vita contemplativa* or contemplative life. More precisely, for Arendt, in the history of political thought, the gulf or conflict between philosophy and politics opened with the trial of Socrates. That is, the political thought began when the trial, condemnation, and death of Socrates made his pupil, Plato, despair of the political life, and the just order of an ideal city. The fundamental tension between the philosophical and the political came to an end with a defeat for philosophy.<sup>58</sup> Plato's despair is given in terms of the philosopher's attitude toward the *polis*, and a clear description of it, Arendt asserts, is the core point of the cave allegory.<sup>59</sup>

To put the point differently. As we know from the cave allegory, Arendt reminds us, that the philosopher "leaves the cave in perfect singularity" and his "experience of the eternal, which to Plato was *arrhēton* ('unspeakable') or ineffable, can take place only outside the *polis*, i.e., "outside of the realm of human affairs and outside of the plurality of [human beings]." The word given to the experience of the eternal is

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<sup>56</sup> Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics*, 53–4.

<sup>57</sup> Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 95.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 73 and 91. In Arendt's reading, the Platonic metaphor of a conflict between body [politics] and soul [philosophy] is essentially meant to express the conflict between philosophy and politics.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 94. Familiarity with the allegory of the cave is assumed.

“contemplation” or the unspeakable. The contemplative life is considered “the only truly free way of life.”<sup>60</sup> In the final analysis, Hannah Arendt argues that Plato makes a leap from politics (*vita activa*, an active life) to philosophy (*vita contemplativa* or a contemplative life), an escape from speech (*lexis*) and action (*praxis*) to silence or the unspeakable. In short, according to Arendt, Plato set the foundation for an “escape from politics altogether,” from “the reality of human affairs into the solidity of quiet,” silence.<sup>61</sup> It should be clear that while philosophy is bound up with *vita contemplativa*, politics is bound up with *vita activa*, the realm of human affairs.

## Politics as a Miracle

What then is politics? Arendt understands politics only in terms of the original Greek understanding of politics. Due to space limits, a fair, complete account of Arendt’s conception of politics is virtually impossible; we will be focusing on some critical aspects of it. The very concept of politics will be formulated as a miracle.

Arendt’s conception of politics is inseparable from that of *vita activa*. *Labor*, *work*, and *action* are the three activities that form Hanna Arendt’s concept of *vita activa* presented to us in *The Human Condition* (1958). The *vita activa*, or rather, these three activities, are identified as “fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man [human beings].”<sup>62</sup> *Action*, “the highest rank in the hierarchy of the *vita activa*,” is the last activity and corresponds to both the public and the political realms.<sup>63</sup> Unlike labor, “action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others”<sup>64</sup>; Arendt continues by claiming that “[w]ith word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth”; Arendt calls this the fact or the human condition of *natality*,

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<sup>60</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 20 and 14.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

a new beginning of somebody, the sheer *capacity of being oneself*.<sup>65</sup> Unlike labor, this insertion is “not forced upon us by necessity,” and it is “not promoted by utility,” like work.<sup>66</sup> In other words, this insertion is an expression of freedom—“The *raison d'être* [essence] of politics is freedom,” in the sense that it is unforeseeable.<sup>67</sup> In other words, this insertion means that “the unexpected can be expected.”<sup>68</sup> In light of Arendt’s terminology, I call this insertion *political*.

According to Greek thought, freedom stands in direct opposition to necessity. The Greeks introduced politics, a distinct mode of existence, to escape, especially, from the force imposed on them by the pitiless, natural condition of their biological or natural needs and wants. The Greek term *polis*, which arises out of acting and speaking together, was understood to enable qualified people (the masters of the necessities of life) to make a transition from the sphere of necessity (a pre-political realm) to that of freedom. In other words, according to Arendt, the Greek understanding of the political is based on a necessary distinction between two radically different spheres, private versus public, “between what is his own (*idiom*) and what is communal (*koinon*).”<sup>69</sup> For Arendt, “the rise of the city-state and the public realm occurred at the expense of the private realm of family and household.”<sup>70</sup> The central body of a private sphere, Arendt elucidates, was the household. The private sphere, the sphere of natural, biological necessity, was driven by “wants and needs.”<sup>71</sup> It was primarily characterized by the principle of “rule and being ruled,” i.e., “inequality” and violence, which was understood to be a pre-political phenomenon. The central body of the public sphere, on the other hand, is the *polis*, the activities of “action (*praxis*)” and “speech (*lexis*),” speech as a means of persuasion.<sup>72</sup> It is the only space where human beings could “show who

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 176–7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 146.

<sup>68</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 24 and 30.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 25.



they really and inexchangeably were.”<sup>73</sup> In a nutshell, what Arendt means by politics is that everything needs to be decided through persuasion, not force or violence.

I must reaffirm that the public world of appearances, for Arendt, is the human world of insertion, disclosure, and meaningful engagement; it is what humans can share and have in common. Arendt introduces the term “public” to accentuate the distinctiveness of the human world in two different ways. First, she claims that the term “public” signifies the human-made world itself to the extent that it is a shared world or space. This leads us to the second meaning of the term, the idea that the world is materially shared but only phenomenologically can be understood. That is, its proper space, not its physical location, but its phenomenological location lies between individuals. Phenomenologically, *trust* in the world as a place fit for human appearance is necessary. Analogically, Arendt helps us understand what she means by this common, phenomenological world or space by asking us to imagine the world *like* a “table” located between those who sit around it. So, like a table, or “every in-between,” this world “relates and separates us at the same time.”<sup>74</sup> So, the unnatural, artificial, or human world is a world that “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other,” separating us from each other. Deed and word are central to this shared, worldly “in-between” of human beings.

Unlike Plato, Arendt’s understanding of politics is characterized by a consistent meditation on an affirmation of the world of appearances and the fact of natality. Thus, for Arendt, there exists an inextricable bond between the world of appearances, the fact of natality, and politics. What ultimately saves the shared human-made space from its “normal, ‘natural’ ruin” is finally “the fact of natality,” in which, she thinks, the faculty of *vita activa* (speech and action) is ontologically rooted.<sup>75</sup> The vocal and face-to-face relations bring the open space or the world of appearance into being. In other words, this shared space is a place of disclosure of “who” in opposition to “what” somebody is. For Arendt, to

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 52 and 134.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 247.

be alive, of course not in biological terms, means to be in this human world and possess an urge toward self-disclosure—"The disclosure of the 'who' through action, and the setting of a new beginning through action."<sup>76</sup>

For Arendt, the question "Who are you?" is essentially political. Yet, a close reading of Arendt shows that the root of this question is both phenomenological and ontological. Indeed, Arendt's concept of politics is constituted by both speech and action, out of which rise the realm of human affairs. Speech and action reveal the unique distinctness of the human subject.<sup>77</sup> To be sure, sheer human togetherness—being "*with* others and neither for nor against them" is a necessary condition for "the revelatory quality of speech and action to come to the fore" or for "the space of appearance comes into being." So, this implies that the space of appearance or the revelatory quality of speech and action does not always exist. In other words, the reality of *the political* is "guaranteed by the presence of others."<sup>78</sup> In essence, politics is understood to be a "miracle," and "the miracle that can save the world, the realm of human affairs...is ultimately the fact of natality."<sup>79</sup>

## Epilogue: Nietzsche's Negative Politics

We are still reflecting on Nietzsche to understand in what sense he could be read as a political, not theorist, but a philosopher. In the second section, we tried to uncover how problematic and contentious it is to call Nietzsche a political or anti-political thinker. My aim here is not to seek to resolve this issue once and for all. Instead, my objective here is to present Nietzsche as a political philosopher in the light of my understanding of Arendt's conception of politics presented in the preceding section. In this regard, my concern is not to find out how Arendtian' Nietzsche might be.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 180, and 199.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 178 and 247.

It is a fact that it is by no means easy to classify Nietzsche, who possesses a dramatic view of human existence. As a radically exceptional thinker, Nietzsche should be seen as one of the great outsiders; his philosophical thought does not fit into any existing traditions. Alain Badiou describes him as an “anti-philosopher.” By this, Badiou means that Nietzsche’s thought stands in direct opposition to “the speculative nihilism of philosophy,” and his role as anti-philosopher is to announce an “act that will in fact destroy philosophy.”<sup>80</sup> Or, in Nietzsche’s own terms, the nightmare of “dogmatic philosophy”—namely, “Platonism in Europe.”<sup>81</sup> More precisely, Nietzsche traces dogmatic philosophy back to Plato’s ideas of “pure spirit and the Good in itself.”— “[I]t must...be said that the worst, most prolonged, and most dangerous of all errors to this day was a dogmatist’s error, namely Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the Good in itself.”<sup>82</sup> Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the Good in itself, as occurs in the cave allegory, as we learnt from Arendt, must be understood in a political context. However, in the parable of “The madman,” Nietzsche implicitly discloses his violent polemics against Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the Good in itself (also the Christian God); he aims to invert Plato’s parable of the cave. In other words, Nietzsche sees the same dogmatist’s error in Christianity— Christianity suffers from the same dogmatist’s error since, as he claims, “Christianity is Platonism for the people.”<sup>83</sup> Hence, Nietzsche’s violent polemics against Platonism is his struggle against Christianity and *vice versa*. His overall aim is to confront and find ourselves after the departure or death of God.<sup>84</sup>

Neither Platonism nor Christianity, Nietzsche thinks, has been faithful to this earthly world or what the traditional metaphysicians have called the apparent/sensible world. Nietzsche, or, more specifically, the hermit Zarathustra **asks us to “remain faithful to the earth,”<sup>85</sup> to this worldly life, or the sensual life, rather than to the other-worldly hopes, the non-sensuous metaphysical world, or the Platonic**

<sup>80</sup> Badiou, “Who Is Nietzsche?” 1.

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 4. I must say that I do not necessarily agree with Nietzsche’s reading of Plato.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, “Preface,” *Beyond Good and Evil*; *The Gay Science*, §125.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue § 3,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

world that lies above the cave. Plato, Nietzsche believed, was a coward in the face of reality, the earth. According to Nietzsche, the will to nothingness, i.e., nihilism, is inherent in Platonism. In a nutshell, Nietzsche claimed to be ending the era of both Christianity and Platonism. More precisely, Nietzsche understood his philosophy, Arendt thinks, as “inverted Platonism,” turning the Platonic world upside down.<sup>86</sup> As mentioned in the preceding section, to claim that Plato was unfaithful to the earth is to say that Plato was unfaithful to politics, the realm of human affairs.

In other words, Platonism is understood as a form of escapism from the political—i.e., a leap from speech and action into the sphere of ineffable and inner freedom. In the light of my interpretation of Arendt, Nietzsche’s affirmation and creation of the earthly world could therefore be read in a political context—of course, in Arendt’s sense of politics. Thus, we can argue that only with word and deed one can remain faithful to the earth. That is, only through speech and action can one insert oneself into this earthly world, a physical and phenomenological public space where one can show who one really and irreplaceably is—the sheer *capacity of being oneself*. This must be understood as a mode of the revelation of self. Recall Zarathustra in “On the Despisers of the Body,” “Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage—whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body.”<sup>87</sup>

Whether in its Platonic or Christian form, the earth or the human world, Nietzsche asserts, must be unchained from its sun. But it is a fact of *natality* that gives “us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon,” to liberate “this earth from its sun.” Nietzsche, or the madman, describes the death of metaphysics, God, the transcendent Good, or the sun as a great deed or rupture.<sup>88</sup> In a word, Nietzsche invites us to return to home, to the earthly world. “There is one thing alone we really care about from the heart—‘bringing something home’,” becoming an inhabitant of this earthly life or world. Here Nietzsche expresses a sense

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<sup>86</sup> Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” 29.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 34.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 125.

that in history, we have been away from home, the earth—"we are unknown to ourselves...how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves?"<sup>89</sup> As mentioned earlier, Arendt would say, through the possibility of natality, speech, and action, which I identified as a political insertion, a miracle. We must understand this insertion as a possibility; it is not something that can be done once and for all.

To be sure, Nietzsche was the first to try to overcome not just the speculative nihilism of dogmatic philosophy, say, of Platonism and Christianity, but also, as Arendt has observed, the nihilism inherent "in the reality of modern life."<sup>90</sup> More specifically, the nihilism inherent in the reality of the modern state. Kaufmann is right when he writes, "[w]e have destroyed our own faith in God. There remains only the void."<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche understands the modern state as *a new idol* aiming to fill the void left by the death of God—The State wishes for "the same idolatry" from humanity as they formerly showed to the Church.<sup>92</sup> Against this modern attempt, Nietzsche, not so much unlike Arendt, wishes to keep the void left by the departure of God as open space. Nietzsche himself asks us to "break the windows and leap to freedom," which, Arendt thinks, is the essence of politics.<sup>93</sup> In a nutshell, I call the Nietzschean anti-political, or, in Badiou's terms, the Nietzschean anti-philosophical approach to the understanding of politics *negative*. I use the term *negative* in Adriana Benzaquén's sense. Benzaquén states, "[n]egative thinking criticizes the existent as that which can and should change, and in so doing, it marks the space of an absence. That absence, however, is not to be filled with images or given a positive content; it is to remain as absence as a possibility."<sup>94</sup> But, this is not a logical possibility; it is a possibility in a sense, as Arendt would say, that the unexpected can be expected.

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<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, "Preface 1," *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," 30.

<sup>91</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 97.

<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as an Educator," 150.

<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 50.

<sup>94</sup> Benzaquén, "Thought and Utopia," 151.

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# The Warnings of Nietzsche's Works: Rhetorical Persuasion in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Death of a Nation* (2018)

David Hollands

In “On Left and Right Nietzscheanism,” Matthew McManus notes that trying to pinpoint a consistent philosophy from Friedrich Nietzsche’s work is difficult; Nietzsche’s style has a “pictorial quality” that “leads to serious difficulties in figuring out what Nietzsche means,” especially so when attempting to “suss out any systematic lesson or philosophy from [his] prolific writings.”<sup>1</sup> This inherent complexity of Nietzsche’s writings led to drastically different left and right political interpretations of his work, with the former “more inspired by the playful, skeptical and genealogical dimensions,” and the latter by the philosopher’s “support for hierarchy.”<sup>2</sup> McManus concludes his overview of left and right Nietzscheanism by accepting Ronald Beiner’s claim that Nietzsche is a

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew McManus, “On Left and Right Nietzscheanism,” *Areo*, last modified August 8, 2020, <https://areomagazine.com/2020/08/19/on-left-and-right-nietzscheanism/>.

<sup>2</sup> McManus, “On Left and Right Nietzscheanism.”

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considerably more right-wing thinker than left, and that “this poses a major challenge for progressives who want to interpret him in an emancipatory fashion, since we need to decouple what is useful in his writing from a great deal of inegalitarian and reactionary virulence.”<sup>3</sup> McManus also notes that, “despite this, Nietzsche’s work has helped pilot many through the strange tides of modernity and postmodernity,” and that this “makes interpreting him properly an important theoretical task.”<sup>4</sup>

I agree with McManus’ sentiment. However, my personal way of dealing with Nietzsche is not to concern myself with how accurately his writings can be appropriated by left or right thinkers,<sup>5</sup> but to emphasize how Nietzsche’s work demonstrates the potential danger of texts that foreground rhetoric in order to push troubling or deadly ideologies, as is the case with two films—Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Dinesh D’Souza’s *Death of a Nation* (2018)—that I discuss later in this chapter. Furthermore, one can look to the ‘pictorial quality’ of Nietzsche’s writings overall as a crucial reminder of how frighteningly easy it is to mobilize affective rhetoric—textual, visual, or otherwise—for one’s own ends, whatever those ends may be, especially in this current era of post-modern conservatism.

I will unpack what is meant by post-modern conservatism and my particular use of the concept later. For now, I wish to address further my view that interpreting Nietzsche properly may not be the most fruitful task. As mentioned above, Ronald Beiner is one critic firmly on the side of Nietzsche being a politically right thinker, to put Beiner’s sentiment mildly. In *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, Beiner stresses that when

Nietzsche wrote[...]that what defines the European problem as he understands it[...]is “the cultivation of a new caste to rule over Europe,” he really meant “caste” (*Kaste*), he really meant “rule” (*regierenden*), and he

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<sup>3</sup> McManus, “On Left and Right Nietzscheanism.”

<sup>4</sup> McManus, “On Left and Right Nietzscheanism.”

<sup>5</sup> There are far better minds than mine for that task.

really meant “Europe.” These were not metaphors for something “spiritual.” This is politically innocent only on the assumption that Nietzsche would never be read by people who took him at his word.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard not to be compelled by Beiner's claims regarding Nietzsche's ideas. My own skimming of some of Nietzsche's greatest hits includes ugly reflections on the decline of the “freedom of the will” in Europe, seemingly because of “a senseless, precipitate attempt at a radical blending of classes, and *consequently* of races” that contributes to “paralysis of will”<sup>7</sup>; the section Beiner mentions concerning the need for a “type of will, instinct, imperative that is anti-liberal to the point of malice” to maintain institutions<sup>8</sup>; or the ominous declaration that “there will be wars such as the earth has never seen,” a “great politics” that Nietzsche boasts he will have inspired,<sup>9</sup> potentially leading to the rise of Nazism. Passages such as these compelled Beiner to sum up Nietzsche's philosophical “essential core commitment”<sup>10</sup> as the following: “Western civilization is going down the toilet because of too much emphasis on truth and rationality and too much emphasis on equal human dignity.”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Sue Prideaux, in “Far right, misogynist, humourless? Why Nietzsche is misunderstood,” attempts to rescue Nietzsche from being interpreted as a right-wing or far-right thinker by his critics or appropriated as such by those on the alt-right. Prideaux notes that Nietzsche hated “the big state, nationalism, and antisemitism”; that much of Nietzsche's perceived right-wing politics was a result of how his sister

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 17–18.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: The Modern Library), 129.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (2005; reis., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 214.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo: How to Become What you Are,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (2005; reis., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144.

<sup>10</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 24.

Elisabeth curated his work as part of her “Nietzsche Archive”; that Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, wrote that he deplored “how monstrous it is that young women are told that sex is shameful and sinful, only to be hurled into marriage and propelled[...]into the terror and duty of sex”; and so on.<sup>12</sup> Sean Illing, in “The alt-right is drunk on bad readings of Nietzsche. The Nazis were too,” performs a similar task as Prideaux in attempting to rehabilitate Nietzsche’s image and philosophy. Illing mounts a spirited defense of Nietzsche’s ideas, including what can potentially be used as a refutation of the claim that Nietzsche’s great politics meant something inherently fascistic:

Nietzsche also condemned the “blood and soil” politics of Otto von Bismark, Otto Von, the Prussian statesman who unified Germany in 1871, for cementing his power by stoking nationalist resentments and appealing to racial purity. So there’s no way to square Nietzsche’s philosophy with the racial politics of the alt-right, just as it wasn’t fair to charge Nietzsche with inspiring Nazism.<sup>13</sup>

Again, in my own skimming of Nietzsche’s greatest hits, I found statements that seem to contradict his right-wing—even fascistic—thinking, just as there are statements that appear to show the opposite: Nietzsche refers to the “Jews” as “the strongest, toughest, and purest race at present living in Europe” who “know how to succeed even under the worst conditions.”<sup>14</sup> And shortly after declaring that a malicious, anti-liberal will is necessary to maintain institutions, Nietzsche appears to decry the “question” of what to do about labor power as “stupid” because the “workers are doing far too well *not* to ask for more, little by little

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<sup>12</sup> Sue Prideaux, “Far Right, Misogynist, Humourless? Why Nietzsche Is Misunderstood,” *The Guardian*, last modified October 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/06/expanding-nietzsche-myths-need-dynamiting>.

<sup>13</sup> Sean Illing, “The alt-right is drunk on bad readings of Nietzsche. The Nazis were too,” *Vox*, last modified December 30, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/17/16140846/alt-right-nietzsche-richard-spencer-nazism>.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 185. Of course, despite Nietzsche’s pro-semitic statement, referring to a race as pure, which implies that there are others that are not, is, of course, fraught with its own social Darwinist implications.

and with diminishing modesty.”<sup>15</sup> That being stated, Illing ultimately leaves readers with doubt as to whether it can be claimed with certainty that alt-right or Nazi interpretations of Nietzsche are bad readings of the philosopher. Despite Illing's efforts, even he feels he must concede that it is “partly” Nietzsche's fault that “he's been hijacked by racists and fascists” because “his writings are riddled with contradictions and puzzles” and “his fixation on the future of humankind is easily confused with a kind of social Darwinism.”<sup>16</sup> Stating that Nietzsche's work is riddled—*riddled!*—with contradictory ideas that inspired the alt-right and the Nazis should not lead one to conclude that the philosopher's thought is as clearcut as Illing presents it to be. One question derails Illing's overall claims: if there are so many contradictions in Nietzsche's works, how can one be sure which contradictory statement is the correct, representative one?

I should once again be clear that I am not arguing that Beiner definitively holds the correct interpretation of Nietzsche. Prideaux's and Illing's articles do not necessarily counter the claims of significant right-wing elements in Nietzsche's writings as made by Beiner and others so much as it *shows* that labeling Nietzsche as a right-wing thinker can, for me, be just as tenuous as insisting that his ideas are on the left politically. I have already shared Beiner's pithy summation of Nietzsche's essential core commitment earlier. Beiner arrives at his summation by first acknowledging that Nietzsche's appeal is “how generative he is,” “how protean he is,” that there is “something for everyone” in Nietzsche's writings, and that Nietzsche's “mode of thought” has a “radical pluralism” that “completely outflanks or trumps any preceding mode of intellectual pluralism.”<sup>17</sup> Despite this radical pluralism, Beiner falls back on a dictum from Martin Heidegger that each “thinker thinks only one *single*

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 215. I realize that this section can also be interpreted to have the opposite meaning, namely, that Europe should not have given workers more power in the first place.

<sup>16</sup> Illing, “The Alt-Right Is Drunk on Bad Readings of Nietzsche. The Nazis Were Too.”

<sup>17</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 22.

thought”<sup>18</sup> and that that’s “what makes them great thinkers.”<sup>19</sup> Beiner then states the following:

I truly believe that Heidegger was right about that.[...]And if it’s true, it must be true of Nietzsche as well (especially since Heidegger formulated his principle with Nietzsche specifically in mind). So we must ask, What is the *singular* philosophical impulse in Nietzsche amid what looks like unbounded pluralism?<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Beiner attempts to find the “essence” of this singular, right-wing philosophical impulse in Nietzsche by treating “Nietzsche’s pluralism as a rhetoric” that is in the “service” of Nietzsche’s “essential core commitment.”<sup>21</sup> I do find this argument interesting, but not particularly convincing. I am not nearly well-versed enough in Heidegger’s work to know if Beiner’s explanation of Heidegger’s dictum is accurate, though I feel that that is beside the point here; Beiner’s version of Heidegger, at the very least, may simply be incorrect that a great thinker must have only one single thought. Moreover, even if that statement about single thought is found to be true somehow, Nietzsche’s radical pluralism could merely be an indication that Nietzsche is *not* a great thinker, not that he is an inherently right-wing one. Finally, even though Beiner treats Nietzsche’s pluralism as rhetoric, to me, this move does not settle the contradictions that still emerge through that rhetoric. Again, if there are so many contradictions in Nietzsche’s works, how can one be sure which contradictory statement is the correct, representative one? *When* do you choose to take Nietzsche at his word or not?

Ultimately, these admittedly brief explorations of writers who attempt to pull Nietzsche either left or right politically serve to underscore my belief that a good use of Nietzsche—or at least a good use of Nietzsche

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Volume 3: *The Will to Power as Knowledge and Metaphysics*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 4, quoted in Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 22–23.

for me—is to study his writings to examine how political and ideological rhetoric—or simply rhetoric in general—works broadly to persuade others to accept its message. If I may be so arrogant, perhaps the best way to interpret Nietzsche now is not to interpret him at all, but to question why so many politically and ideologically disparate thinkers find a home in his writings. Nietzsche's particular kind of affective rhetoric has many analogs, some of which will be explored now in the context of the fascist cinema aesthetics of *Triumph of the Will*.

To comprehend the aesthetic power of *Triumph of the Will*, it is first important to have a sense of the aesthetics of Nietzsche's works, of which much has been written. The following section presents the briefest of overviews of interpretations of Nietzsche's styles. After this overview, and with Nietzsche's styles in mind, *Triumph of the Will* and its aesthetic influences will be explored in some depth, preceded by an analysis of *Death of a Nation*.

Sarah Kofman observes that "Nietzsche's early works reveal an original conception both of philosophy and philosophical 'style' in the way that Nietzsche "eliminates the opposition between metaphor and concept" and "inaugurates[...]a philosophy that deliberately makes use of metaphors, even if it risks being confused with poetry," to have "language regain its most natural expression[...]and[...] style."<sup>22</sup> James Winchester believes that Nietzsche's style shifted further following *Human All Too Human* to being "aphoristic," a change that came about "because Nietzsche no longer believe[d] absolute truth is attainable and[...]because Nietzsche realize[d] this his genius does not lie in long essays[...][but in] [...]a quick jumping in and out of problems."<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche spoke of himself, oh so humbly, as having "the most multifarious art of style that anyone has ever had at his disposal," and suggests that he searches for "people capable and worthy of a similar pathos" to him—or "his" Zarathustra.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Kofman, "Metaphor, Symbol, Metamorphosis," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Dell Publishing Co, Inc., 1977), 208–209.

<sup>23</sup> James J. Winchester, *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche after Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 129–130.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo," 104.

Malcolm Bull points out that even though most people who read Nietzsche will likely see themselves reflected in the people Nietzsche seems to despise, Nietzsche's rhetoric can still compel them and have them identify with Nietzsche's grandiose personal claims—or his claims in general. As Bull puts it, “who, in the privacy of reading, can fail to find within themselves some of those qualities of honesty and courage and loftiness of soul that Nietzsche describes?”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Nietzsche, rhetorically, can provide a kind of wish-fulfillment for his readers, especially, and paradoxically, for disadvantaged ones.

Bull finds two ways of reading Nietzsche that could result in readers accepting his ideas by identifying *with* Nietzsche as if he were a protagonist of a story: reading for victory and reading like a loser. In the former scenario, readers “identify [themselves] with the goals of the author” and, in “so unscrupulously seeking for [themselves] the rewards of the text,” readers “become exemplars of the uninhibited will to power” and, in potentially mastering Nietzsche's texts, “have demonstrated[...]those qualities of ruthlessness and ambition that qualify them to be ‘masters of the earth’.”<sup>26</sup> Bull highlights a particularly affective section from “Why I Am A Destiny” in *Ecce Homo* as an example of Nietzsche's rhetorical sway over his readers, which I choose to quote in full from Nietzsche's text:

I know my lot. One day my name will be connected with the memory of something tremendous, - a crisis such as the earth has never seen, the deepest collision of conscience, a decision made *against* everything that has been believed, demanded, held sacred so far. I am not a human being, I am dynamite.<sup>27</sup>

Today, that pronouncement above could easily be either a hero's or villain's speech in, say, a Marvel or DC superhero film. The pronouncement is dramatic, poetic, compelling, and enthralling. Bull asks, “who has not felt the sudden thrill of something explosive within themselves;

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<sup>25</sup> Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo,” 143–144.

or, at the very least, emboldened by Nietzsche's daring, allowed themselves to feel a little more expansive than usual?"<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, reading like a loser means that "we read for victory against ourselves, making ourselves the victims of the text."<sup>29</sup> Readers will turn away from Nietzsche, but out of *intimidation*. As Bull puts it, Nietzsche's "gaze" through the text "is too piercing, his presence too powerful. We must lower our eyes and turn away."<sup>30</sup>

In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl, whether intentionally or not, transposes Nietzsche's literary rhetorical strategies to the moving image medium of cinema in startling ways. Before these ways are explored, it is important to establish briefly some overall rhetorical strategies of the film and what underpins them. In the opening credits, *Triumph of the Will* is labeled as the "historical document of the 1934 Congress of the National Socialist German Workers Party" and the "Party Day of Victory," taking place from September 4th to September 10th in Nuremberg. Shortly after the title card, spectators are again reminded that the film is a "document," commissioned by "order of the Führer."<sup>31</sup> These credits immediately establish the film's attempt to simultaneously appear as an unbiased recording of the events depicted, but also to remind spectators subtly of the powerful State force behind its creation. Bill Nichols writes that cinematic narrative diegesis is a "roadbed for the narrative's advance" and the illusionary "coalescence of numerous codes, such as lighting, costume, decor, camera angle, camera height, composition (framing), camera movement (reframing), *mise-en-scène* (movements or staging within the frame), editing, graphics, music, sound effects, and aspects of verbal sound."<sup>32</sup> Each film, documentary or otherwise, has a narrative diegesis because cinema narratives are ultimately imaginary constructions. Documentaries tend to have a greater air of objectivity because they typically rely "heavily on being able to convey an impression

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<sup>28</sup> Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1935; Franklin, MI: Synapse Films, 2015), Blu-ray.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 82.



of authenticity.”<sup>33</sup> The opening credits of *Triumph of the Will* attempt to establish the film as an objective document to efface the reality that the film is a diegetic construction, and an overtly manipulative one at that. What also helps this illusion is the nature of the recorded image itself. As Nichols notes, words “can indeed lie, and they can lie about images as well as anything else, though the very ambiguity of an image seems to soften these possible lies to helpful notes of emphasis.”<sup>34</sup> A moving image resembles how people see in everyday life and can be inherently more difficult to be skeptical about as a result. Propaganda documentaries like *Triumph of the Will* take full advantage of that inherent quality of the moving image.

It should be noted that, according to Max Whyte, Nietzsche’s writings became influential in Germany in the 1930s in significant part due to philosopher Alfred Baeumler, who idolized Nietzsche as the “great political theorist of the post-liberal era” and claimed that the “spiritual decline of the West[...]stemmed from mistaken assumptions about the nature of man,” illusions which Nietzsche “had shattered[...]in the most uncompromising fashion.”<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Baeumler and other National Socialist theorists “transformed Nietzschean philosophy into a collective politics, anchored on the struggle for dominance between opposing cultural world-views.”<sup>36</sup> Likely strongly influenced by this National Socialist interpretation of Nietzsche’s work, *Triumph of the Will* promotes a conception of the ideal German citizen as defined by the NSDAP Party Program. The ideal German citizen was “the unquestioned insider, empowered by his Aryan racial identity regardless of his religion, country of citizenship, or residence” and “envisioned as able-bodied, a dedicated worker, community-minded, and a protector of German women and children.”<sup>37</sup> One sees this conception of the ideal German

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<sup>33</sup> Bill Nichols, introduction to *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Max Whyte, “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler’s ‘Heroic Realism’,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43. no. 2 (2008): 181.

<sup>36</sup> Whyte, “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich,” 182.

<sup>37</sup> Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature* (Leiden & Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 17.

citizen throughout *Triumph of the Will*, be it the strategically placed close-ups of blond-haired boys in crowds watching Hitler's motorcade pass by, the seemingly endless scenes of marching soldiers in rallies, or the repetitive, but rhetorically thunderous, speeches given by Hitler and other members of the Party. Additionally, *Triumph of the Will* emphasizes the Party Program's insistence on the importance of modernizing and moving Germany forward while maintaining German traditions and values as defined by the Nazis. The Party Program "defined the German nation (*Volk*) and the ideal Nazi in national and racial terms" and "called for the unity between all Germans across the political factions of the Weimar Republic[...]"<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the term *Volk* "itself reverberates with Romantic notions of premodern conditions and simple country folk."<sup>39</sup>

These Nietzsche-influenced Nazi ideals are represented potently throughout *Triumph of the Will*. For example, an early sequence in the film set at a Hitler Youth encampment insidiously emphasizes the fun of serving the Führer. The young soldiers are seen joyously preparing their appearances by washing, shining their boots, roughhousing, engaging in coordinated drumming, enjoying some Bratwurst sausages, and other such activities. This entire sequence in the Hitler Youth encampment is set to uplifting folksy music, emphasizing the unity via tradition of all the soldiers portrayed on screen. This sequence is immediately followed by a march of farmers in traditional costume, and the setting has moved from the militaristic encampment to a rural town. Roughly fifteen minutes later, during the "Reich Labor Service Review before Hitler" sequence, a sea of soldiers moving and holding their spades in formation profess loyalty to Hitler and Germany. In unison, captured in long shots, they promise: "Here we stand. We are ready to carry Germany into a new era."<sup>40</sup> Then several isolated close-ups are shown in sequence of various soldiers. Structured like a musical call and response, the first soldier asks of the rest, "Comrade, where do you come from?"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Triumph of the Will*.

<sup>41</sup> *Triumph of the Will*.

Each soldier answers with a different hometown in Germany. Once this call and response series ends, a long shot of a soldier holding a flag is shown. The soldier is isolated to the right of the image, with a sea of fellow soldiers out of focus in the background. A voice proclaims, "One people!" over this shot. There is a cut to a dynamic, low-angle close-up of Hitler overseeing these actions as another voice proclaims, "One leader!" A further cut shows a full shot of the Hoheitszeichen (the national emblem of Nazi Germany) as yet another voice proclaims, "One Reich!" Finally, there is a cut to a close-up of the Swastika flag swaying lightly in the breeze as a voice proclaims, "Germany!"<sup>42</sup> Again, these sequences meticulously intertwine notions of traditional farm life, positive military cohesion, German people unified across the country, and *all* these cohered elements are portrayed as equally joyous and mighty. This sequence exemplifies Hitler's stated function of propaganda:

The function of propaganda does not lie in the scientific training of the individual, but in calling the masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision. The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc.<sup>43</sup>

With the nationalistic goals of *Triumph of the Will* established and demonstrated briefly, we can now explore what Nietzsche's styles potentially reveal about the verbal and visual rhetoric of the film. It must first be noted that Adolf Hitler's writings have some similar rhetorical strategies as Nietzsche's. Recall that Nietzsche's sway over his readers, as explored above, begins with Nietzsche writing about himself as the protagonist of a story constantly in opposition to antagonistic forces, which subconsciously and compellingly invites reader identification with him and his perspectives. Again, as Bull points out, Nietzsche's self-aggrandizing pronouncements have an energy that is, paradoxically, hard

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<sup>42</sup> *Triumph of the Will*.

<sup>43</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 176, quoted in Glenn B. Infield, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Fallen Film Goddess* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), 231.

to resist. Dagmar C. G. Lorenz observes that *Mein Kampf* (1925), Hitler's autobiographical manifesto, "starts out as a self-narrative to connote authenticity" and further notes that gaining "the reader's trust in a seemingly personal manner makes the programmatic aspects of the text palpable and paves the way for the digressions on history and society in a tone that is both visionary and prophetic."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in their presentations, National Socialist orators, including Hitler, "mixed genres and stylistic registers, included statistics and data, and persuaded through the use of popular sayings and allusions to classical German literature."<sup>45</sup> Part of Hitler's self-narrativizing in *Mein Kampf* to persuade his readers is to add mythic dimensions to the text and describe "himself as an independent mind and a rebellious genius"<sup>46</sup>—does that sound familiar? One can sense this inflated self-aggrandizement in the following passage:

It was during this period that my eyes were opened to two perils, the names of which I scarcely knew hitherto and had no notion of their terrible significance for the existence of the German people. These two perils were Marxism and Judaism.<sup>47</sup>

Here, through the authentically *feeling* self-narrative, Hitler positions himself as the one who can see these named perils to the German people, as well as the one who can save Germany from those perils. As for the mythic element, later in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler attributes his gaining of a sense of national identity to fate: "Fate herself now seemed to supply the finger-post."<sup>48</sup>

In *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler is made into a quasi-mythic figure, much in the way that he presents himself in *Mein Kampf*, almost as if the film can be considered a sequel to the book. Following the opening credits, intertitles inform the audience of the following: "On the 5<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>44</sup> Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1939), 29, quoted in Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 178, quoted in Lorenz, *Nazi Characters in German Propaganda and Literature*, 31.

September 1934, 20 years after the outbreak of the World War, 16 years after the beginning of Germany's suffering, 19 months after the beginning of the German rebirth, Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review his faithful followers."<sup>49</sup> Appropriately, the next series of shots show Hitler's plane as it descends through the clouds before landing to adoring onlookers. This opening implies that the Hitler of *Mein Kampf* from 1925 has been successful in uniting Germany thanks to the devotion of his people, who will now be rewarded once again with his presence. Within the diegeses of *Mein Kampf* and *Triumph of the Will*, he is the hero of the story. It is also important to note Annalisa Zox-Weaver's observation that while the temptation has been to interpret Hitler's introductory descent through the clouds as an angel descending from the heavens, a more nuanced reading is that this moment foregrounds "subjective, human control over technology," and that Hitler's gaze is "connotatively" located in "a body that flies the plane and watchfully scans the panoramic view from the cockpit."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, because spectators do not initially see Hitler until he disembarks after the plane has landed, but *do* see through a simulation of his gaze in a "position of technical mastery" over the airplane, the "perspectival alignment" suggested is "materially and phenomenologically grounded at the same time that it appears omniscient, all-encompassing."<sup>51</sup> In other words, the character of Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* is coded as a panoptic master and national unifier, but not entirely a God supernaturally above his people.

In my previous essay on post-modern conservatism, I spoke briefly of the aesthetics of *Triumph of the Will*, highlighting the "low-angled tracking shots of Hitler travelling through Germany to adoring crowds, the frightening scope of the Nuremberg rallies" and "Hitler's speeches, again filmed at oppressive low angles" as indicative of a fascist cinema

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<sup>49</sup> *Triumph of the Will*.

<sup>50</sup> Annalisa Zox-Weaver, *Women Modernists and Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46.

<sup>51</sup> Zox-Weaver, *Women Modernists and Fascism*, 46.

aesthetic.<sup>52</sup> I wish to add a Nietzschean rhetorical dimension to my aesthetic considerations of *Triumph of the Will* by focusing on two specific scenes that show how the film is oriented through Hitler's gaze. I already mentioned one instance of this earlier, when, during the soldiers' call and response as part of the "Reich Labor Service Review before Hitler" section of the film, an imposing close-up of Hitler is inserted into the sequence of shots designed to show national unity and the power of Germany under the Führer. The two additional sequences—"Hitler Youth and German Youth Rally at the German Stadium" and "Review of SA & SS and Commemoration of the recent death on August 2, 1934 of Reichspräsident and General Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg"—require further consideration.

Recall that Malcolm Bull finds that there are two ways of reading Nietzsche: reading for victory and reading like a loser. Rhetorically, *Triumph of the Will* also inspires these two potential responses. Riefenstahl picks up on the mythic quality of *Mein Kampf* and creates visual moments that emphasize Hitler's power and grandiosity. In the "Hitler Youth and German Youth Rally at the German Stadium" section, Hitler gives one of his many speeches. What makes this speech stand out is Riefenstahl's use of a camera that captures Hitler in a medium shot on a telephoto lens that tracks around him in a semi-circle as he speaks. Crucially, the film cuts to this shot shortly after Hitler arrives at the following portion of his speech: "You standing here today represents something that is happening all over Germany. And we want you, German boys and girls, to absorb everything that we wish for Germany."<sup>53</sup> The choice of lens combined with the camera movement and the objects in the foreground and background that enter and leave the frame because of the camera movement create visual parallax and give the impression that Hitler is moving the world around him with his words. After this shot, there is a cut to several Hitler Youth in medium shot who watch Hitler with full attention as the camera trucks left. This shot is one way that Riefenstahl visually emphasizes how the young ones are absorbing Hitler's message.

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<sup>52</sup> David Hollands, "Hillary's America, Bowling for Columbine, and Post-Modern Conservative Cinema Aesthetics," in *What Is Post-Modern Conservatism: Essay On Our Hugely Tremendous Times*, ed. Matthew McManus (Washington: Zero Books, 2020), 205.

<sup>53</sup> *Triumph of the Will*.

And while Hitler is given a dynamic shot where his words seem to be moving reality around him,<sup>54</sup> the Hitler Youth are filmed with a lateral movement *only*; they are the ones listening, not the ones whose words can move heaven and earth.

In the “Review of SA & SS and Commemoration of the recent death on August 2, 1934 of Reichspräsident and General Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg” section, what is notable is the sheer sense of scale achieved visually through slow camera movements. The shots of the stadium where the commemoration takes place, with rows of soldiers on either side of the stadium creating a path to the altar for Hitler and his two fellow partymen surrounded by columns and pillars of fire are all captured at great distances. Notably, like the camera movement highlighted a paragraph earlier, in this section, Riefenstahl uses slow, lateral, or vertical camera movements to give spectators the full impression of the scale of the stadium and all who are found within it as an expression of Hitler’s accomplished vision. First, we see Hitler and company approaching the altar in an extreme long shot from behind the assembled band, which also gives us a view of the massive swastika banners in the background, the filled stadium stands, the endless rows of soldiers, and so on. This shot slowly trucks left, allowing spectators to take in more of the image as it appears. A similar technique is used by Riefenstahl as Hitler and company leave the altar. In an extreme long shot and at a high angle, the camera tilts up ever-so-slowly to follow Hitler. This tilting shot lingers, emphasizing the time it takes Hitler to leave the altar and walk about halfway down the large path. Again, the visual rhetoric is emphasizing the awe-inspiring scale of Germany’s accomplishments because of the fulfillment of Hitler’s destiny. Even though Hitler himself

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<sup>54</sup> This shot is echoed later in the “Architect Albert Speer’s ‘Sea of Flags’ and ‘Cathedral of Lights’” section, where Hitler gives another speech to a claimed 200,000 men to commemorate the first general review of political leaders of the National Socialist Party. In this section, as Hitler speaks of Germany’s unity after a period of struggle, the camera films him in a long shot with the massive Hoheitszeichen behind him. The shot slowly tracks left, this time showing the audience what Hitler looks like to the men who have gathered before him. He and the Hoheitszeichen appear as one. The shot is not stationary because if it were, that would imply that only one set of eyes is on Hitler.

is diminished in the frame during this sequence, by this point the audience is fully aware that they are supposed to see *everything* around him as his supreme accomplishment.

The visual rhetoric of the sequences described above can inspire reading for victory or reading like a loser. On the one hand, one can be persuaded rhetorically in all the ways described earlier to see Hitler as the genius, saviour protagonist of his story. And on the other hand, one can be so intimidated by Hitler's gaze—just as they can be intimidated by Nietzsche's gaze through the philosopher's writings—that they simply shrink back. It is crucial to study the visual rhetoric of *Triumph of the Will* because of how influential the film has been and continues to be. Although *Triumph of the Will* was not screened that much publicly elsewhere in the world during the ten years it played in Germany,<sup>55</sup> it still found influential audiences globally. As Bill Nichols notes, when *Triumph of the Will* was “released, well before World War II, it won awards and received praise from figures like John Grierson,”<sup>56</sup> the father of Canada's National Film Board and the one who coined the term documentary. Despite knowledge of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, *Triumph of the Will* still finds audiences who champion the film for its aesthetics or who want to absolve the film *and* its director, Riefenstahl, for the ideology the film championed. To highlight some brief examples, historian Dr. Anthony R. Santoro states the following on the Blu-ray audio commentary track for the film over images of Nazis marching in town: “Good cinematography by Leni Riefenstahl. Spectacular! This has to go down in history as the supreme propaganda film, and were it even not propaganda, just from a cinematography point of view, it's spectacular!”<sup>57</sup> Taylor Downing, in his discussion of Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938), another Nazi propaganda film, asks is “the film a piece of Nazi propaganda? Or is it one of the best sports documentaries ever made?” and answers that, “to a degree, it is about both and yet it transcends

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<sup>55</sup> Anthony R. Santoro, “Audio Commentary,” *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1935; Franklin, MI: Synapse Films, 2015), Blu-ray.

<sup>56</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 94.

<sup>57</sup> Santoro, “Audio Commentary.”



both.”<sup>58</sup> Downing says of *Triumph of the Will* that there “is no doubt that while the film is a triumph of the cinema it is also one of the most fascistic films ever made.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the most striking endorsement of *Triumph of the Will*'s aesthetics comes from Mark Lester, the director of *Commando* (1985), the classic Arnold Schwarzenegger actioner. On the DVD audio commentary for the film, Lester states that the visual language of the introduction of Schwarzenegger's character, John Matrix, was directly inspired by Riefenstahl's work. Speaking over a series of close-ups of Schwarzenegger's bulging muscles and sculpted, glistening physique, Lester states the following: “The original idea for the shooting of this scene came from the old Leni Riefenstahl movies, where I was trying to create, you know, what they did in those pictures. Even though they were Nazi films, they had some amazing filmmaking in them, as everyone knows.”<sup>60</sup> Also, what should not be lost on any reader who has seen *Commando* is that in addition to aesthetic inspiration in this scene, Lester seems to have also been inspired by the Nazi *Volk* ideology portrayed in *Triumph of the Will* in some ways. John Matrix is introduced as a man in harmony with nature, carrying a giant log over his shoulder and a chainsaw in his hand, representative of an idealized American conservative individualism. Finally, dare I point out that Lester is using the fascist cinema rhetoric of Riefenstahl's early films to idealize another Austrian? There is much to be said about these wild signifiers, but I will leave those conversations up to the readers.

This desire in some to absolve *Triumph of the Will* and Leni Riefenstahl partially or fully has much to do with the power of the film's rhetoric, and the influence its rhetoric, inspired by Nietzsche, has had on cinema discourse over the decades. David Bathrick observes that *Triumph of the Will* endures because of the “fluidity of its representational

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<sup>58</sup> Taylor Downing, *Olympia*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12.

<sup>59</sup> Downing, *Olympia*, 32.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Lester, “Audio Commentary,” *Commando*, directed by Mark Lester (1985; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

patterns,”<sup>61</sup> which the example of *Commando* above makes clear. Even clearer is Zox-Weaver's description of *Triumph of the Will* as “a film about filmmaking itself.”<sup>62</sup> Zox-Weaver makes that statement in the context of an auteurist interpretation of the film, though I am applying it more broadly. The fluidity of *Triumph of the Will*'s visual rhetoric—its ability to be repurposed in many different contexts for various political and ideological aims—should, by now, remind of how Nietzsche's writings have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Even the fact that *Triumph of the Will* promoted an idealized version of an evil ideology does not stop people from openly expressing their fondness for the film's technical qualities or, as in the case of *Commando*, using its fascist visual rhetoric because that rhetoric is just too compelling to resist. The final stretch of this chapter will be to continue the conversation I started concerning how these fascist aesthetics are used in the context of a post-modern conservative era.

First, what is post-modern conservatism? Matthew McManus identifies five features characteristic of this kind of political ideology: (1) “A dismissal of rational standards for interpreting facts and values,” where “the possibility that there could be such a thing as factual truth or objective values which can be ascertained by any objective means” is rejected; (2) an appeal “to a traditionally powerful identity as a source for truth and a narrative of victimization and resentment demanding its return to the top of the social hierarchy”; (3) a “contradictory and reactionary political ideology” where the “enemies” of post-modern conservatives are “simultaneously regarded as omnipresent and exceptionally strong while also being weak, effeminate, and ‘losers’”; (4) deploying “hyper-modern media to promulgate their political ideology,” which, paradoxically, “will transform society in a way that is incompatible with conservative principles”; (5) “post-modern conservatives actively crack down on other

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<sup>61</sup> David Bathrick, “The Afterlife of *Triumph of the Will*: The First Twenty-five Years,” in *Riefenstahl Screened: Anthology of New Criticism*, eds. Neil Christian Pages, Mary Rhiel, and Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey (New York & London: Continuum), 74.

<sup>62</sup> Zox-Weaver, *Women Modernists and Fascism*, 46.

identity groups” once in power.<sup>63</sup> McManus warns that post-modern conservatism “attack[s] and undermin[es] the credibility of institutions which could counter the narrative of the administration and the identity politics it advocates” by “spreading doubt and engendering irrational skepticism about well verified and substantiated facts and norms,” and “marginalizing alternative sources of knowledge which rely on the traditional standards” or the “outright banning of the expression of alternative narratives.”<sup>64</sup> To state the least, the need to understand post-modern conservatism in order to counter it could not be more crucial; the situation now is dire. My field is Cinema Studies, so my contribution to understanding post-modern conservatism is what I call post-modern conservative cinema aesthetics.

In 2020, I asked how one could go about identifying and interpreting post-modern conservative cinema aesthetics. I made a first attempt at answering this question, in part, by analyzing conservative author and filmmaker Dinesh D’Souza’s propaganda documentary *Hillary’s America: The Secret History of the Democratic Party* (2016) (hereafter *Hillary’s America*), which insists untruthfully, emphatically, and hyperbolically that “the Democratic Party is[...]covertly racist, and uses social welfare programs targeted at low-income urban areas to coerce its largely minority and lower-class voter base into perpetual servitude to the party.”<sup>65</sup> In particular, I explored how *Hillary’s America*’s post-modern conservative cinema aesthetics make this “overly simplistic and conspiratorial account of the Democratic Party palatable to a post-modern conservative audience.”<sup>66</sup> I identified the aesthetics of *Hillary’s America*—and potentially post-modern conservative cinema in general, by extension—as hyper-affective, kitschy, and sensationalistic. Much like the portrayal of Nazi Germany in *Triumph of the Will*, *Hillary’s America*

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew McManus, “Preface: The Five Features of Postmodern Conservatism,” in *What Is Post-Modern Conservatism: Essay On Our Hugely Tremendous Times*, ed. Matthew McManus (Washington: Zero Books, 2020), 2–8.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew McManus, “Preface,” 9.

<sup>65</sup> Hollands, “*Hillary’s America*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and Post-Modern Conservative Cinema Aesthetics,” 209.

<sup>66</sup> Hollands, “*Hillary’s America*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and Post-Modern Conservative Cinema Aesthetics,” 209.

“foregrounds a fascistic kind of nationalism by portraying an idealized version of America”<sup>67</sup> to make its claims affectively persuasive to spectators.

I concluded that initial exploration of post-modern conservative cinema aesthetics by acknowledging that significantly more work needs to be done to determine how many films can be identified as having a post-modern conservative aesthetic, the genealogy of this aesthetic, and this aesthetic's cousins.<sup>68</sup> My contribution to this collection, in addition to my thoughts on Nietzsche and *Triumph of the Will*, is ultimately a small continuation of my initial exploration into post-modern conservative cinema aesthetics, this time focusing on *Death of a Nation*, Dinesh D'Souza's follow-up film to *Hillary's America*. While *Death of a Nation*—released two years after the 2016 U.S. presidential election that saw the inauguration of Donald Trump—does seem like a slightly more mature work than *Hillary's America*, at least in terms of its aesthetics, it is no less an example of a post-modern conservative film than *Hillary's America*. In fact, as I have stated previously, the fact that it is not *as* aesthetically kitschy is what makes it the more insidious of the two.

Overall, *Death of a Nation* seeks to counter the idea that Republicans and Donald Trump's administration are white supremacists and fascists. As D'Souza himself states in his voiceover narration:

Racism and fascism. And we've heard it before. These incendiary accusations have been used for a generation to shame and smear Republicans, conservatives, Christians, and patriots. Is voting for Trump like voting for Hitler? Did Trump win because of fascism and white supremacy? Did he revive the worst strains of America's history of racism? Wouldn't that justify the Left in rejecting the results of the election?<sup>69</sup>

D'Souza then presents his thesis in the form of two questions and a declarative statement: “Who are the real fascists? Who are the real racists?

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<sup>67</sup> Hollands, “*Hillary's America*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and Post-Modern Conservative Cinema Aesthetics,” 209.

<sup>68</sup> In addition to *Hillary's America*, I also show how the documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), a decidedly more politically left-wing work, has certain affective aesthetic similarities.

<sup>69</sup> *Death of a Nation*, directed by Dinesh D'Souza (2018; Calabasas, CA: Quality Flix, 2018), Blu-ray.

We must learn the truth!”<sup>70</sup> *Death of a Nation*’s aesthetics is geared to support D’Souza’s conclusion concerning the so-called truth of America’s Democratic party. That conclusion, which arrives halfway through the film, is the Big Lie, where American progressives supposedly attempted to hide the connections between themselves (as racists and eugenicists) and Italian and German fascists. *Death of a Nation*, of course, claims that fascism is, in fact, a *left-wing* political ideology, and a major part of the Big Lie is that progressives deliberately muddled the definition of fascism to make it *appear* as if it was right wing. Similarly, it is not the Right who are the real racists in America, but the Left, which is why Trump should be elected again in 2020.

To be blunt, summarizing the absurdities of *Death of a Nation* is a near-impossible task, and I am running out of space. As Matt Prigge points out, D’Souza relies in part on a strategy of Gish galloping to pummel his viewers into submission:

[...]he drops a bombshell, then before you’ve had a chance to recover, he hits you with another, over and over and over, for nearly two hours. It’s a downright Trumpian move: exhaust your enemies (and your supporters) through the sheer volume of your nonsense.<sup>71</sup>

In the context of post-modern conservative cinema aesthetics, what can the earlier discussion of Nietzsche’s styles and the fascist cinematic rhetoric of *Triumph of the Will* reveal about *Death of a Nation*?

While *Death of a Nation* is certainly a propaganda documentary, it is a different mode of documentary than *Triumph of the Will*. As described earlier, *Triumph of the Will* presents itself as an objective, unbiased recording of the events it depicts. *Death of a Nation* presents itself similarly, but through different means. Like *Hillary’s America*, *Death of a Nation* is a participatory documentary in the sense that its author, Dinesh D’Souza, is the documentary’s protagonist. He directs the documentary, narrates it, acts onscreen as the interviewer, and is the star

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<sup>70</sup> *Death of a Nation*.

<sup>71</sup> Matt Prigge, “Death of a Nation: More Angry Nonsense from Trump’s Favorite Film-Maker,” *The Guardian*, last modified July 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/31/dinesh-dsouza-death-of-a-nation-film-donald-trump>.

of many close-ups of him looking befuddled or concerned. Spectators identify with him precisely because he is the driving force of the documentary's narrative, is consistently onscreen as a character, and claims to be trying to uncover a terrible truth that has been hidden from the public. Just as Nietzsche positions himself as the protagonist of his own work fighting against an establishment he despises, D'Souza makes himself the protagonist of *Death of a Nation* who desperately wants to save America from what he sees as the left-wing forces that could destroy it. To paraphrase Malcolm Bull in the context of *Death of a Nation*, it can potentially be difficult *not* to identify with D'Souza as the protagonist of the propaganda documentary and read for victory with him.<sup>72</sup>

The aesthetic similarities—and differences—of *Death of a Nation* to *Triumph of the Will* are subtle, but fascinating. *Triumph of the Will* was intended primarily for German audiences of its time. Cinema, with its particular narrative styles that had formed by the 1930s, proved to be an incredibly effective medium for disseminating Nazi propaganda. In one of its most potent rhetorical strategies, *Death of a Nation* idealizes and mythologizes both Donald Trump and former American president Abraham Lincoln, but in notably different ways than Riefenstahl idealizes Hitler in *Triumph of the Will*. For one, there is never a moment in *Death of a Nation* where Trump is portrayed dynamically the way Hitler is in *Triumph of the Will*, at least in cinematic terms. Trump is always seen the way the public would be accustomed to seeing him: in archival footage from speeches recorded on video with the camera shooting him at eye-level in medium or long shots while he is speaking, walking around, etc. D'Souza does not need to make his portrayals of Trump more dynamic because spectators, in our current context, are familiar with viewing Trump mediated through current media technologies. That audience familiarity with Trump and lack of dynamic aesthetics whenever Trump is shown onscreen is likely a strength for D'Souza rhetorically.

That being stated, the portrayal of Abraham Lincoln in *Death of a Nation* more closely resembles Riefenstahl's techniques in *Triumph of*

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<sup>72</sup> I admit that I cannot necessarily see how one can read *Death of a Nation* as a loser, since D'Souza is not the most intimidating protagonist.

*the Will*. In *Death of a Nation*, D'Souza claims that Trump is Lincoln's modern analog, and Lincoln is one of D'Souza's primary symbols of resistance against so-called Democratic or progressive left-wing fascism. Roughly fifty-five minutes into *Death of a Nation*, Lincoln is shot standing in a field in a low-angle medium shot on a telephoto lens that, as in *Triumph of the Will*, is tracking slowly around him to create visual parallax. As with Hitler, the world is made to appear to be moved by Lincoln's presence. This shot is carefully aligned with voiceover narration from D'Souza: "The great opponent of the Democratic plantation... was Abraham Lincoln."<sup>73</sup> It is fascinating that Lincoln, a figure of the past, is portrayed with the same kind of visual rhetoric as Adolf Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* whereas Trump, a figure of the immediate present, is not. Furthermore, it is likely that D'Souza is fully aware of the potential implications of this aesthetic choice; a clip from *Triumph of the Will* is shown in *Death of a Nation*, specifically from the "Reich Service Labor Review before Hitler" section. This clip plays under D'Souza's claim that the Nazi concept of cultural conformity is akin to modern-day political correctness, which is a stunning visual appropriation of fascist cinematic discourse by a filmmaker who intends to convince spectators that said discourse is not, in fact, fascist. It is one of the many headscratchers in *Death of a Nation* that is, in fact, perfectly consistent with the film's utter disregard for factual, historical, or logical consistency—in other words, the perfectly consistent, *inconsistent* post-modern conservative text with the aesthetics to match it.

In disregarding questions of whether Nietzsche was a right or left thinker politically, at least for my purposes, I have attempted to show how a closer look at the philosopher's style—and interpretations of same by Nietzsche's critics—potentially provide a guidepost for not only why his rhetoric is so effective and seductive despite the many contradictions in his writings, but also why works that make use of the same or similar techniques, in literary, filmic, or other contexts, are equally effective—and potentially dangerous. *Triumph of the Will* was produced in the modern era in support of an abhorrent, evil ideology. Its fascist visual language, inspired by Nietzsche, continues to lurk in the shadows

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<sup>73</sup> *Death of a Nation*.

of media, ready to be brought into the light once again. Understanding the potential origins and evolutions of this visual language is important to recognize it when it is mobilized in different contexts, such as in *Death of a Nation*, and especially crucial to do so in our current era of post-modern conservatism where attempts at seeking truth are an increasingly rare commodity.

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