Chapter Title:

Friedrich Nietzsche: The Hammer Goes to Monticello

Chapter Abstract:

Many American political theorists, political leaders, historians, and regular citizens view Thomas Jefferson as an embodiment of American political idealism, love for humanity, and faith in reason. Friedrich Nietzsche would find much to object to in Jefferson’s political thought. In this chapter, Nietzsche’s understanding of reason, morality, equality, Christianity, and democracy will be described and applied to an explanation and analysis of the same elements of Jefferson’s political thought. By borrowing Nietzsche’s philosophical hammer to “sound out” Jefferson’s mind, it will be argued that Jefferson’s oft-celebrated democracy of reason is tinged with misanthropy and world hatred. In other words, his vision is a manifestation of the ascetic ideal and thus is ultimately nihilistic. Because many see Jefferson as a paradigmatic figure in the American Founding, even as an incarnation of the American spirit, the chapter has broad implications for interpreting a fundamental dimension of the American political tradition. Through the particular example of Jefferson, the chapter also offers a sense of Nietzsche’s broader rejection of Enlightenment rationalism and objective reasoning as such.