

Nietzsche: A Radical Challenge To Political Theory?

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Only if mankind possessed a universally recognised goal would it be possible to propose 'thus and thus is the right course of action': for the present there exists no such goal. It is thus irrational and trivial to impose the demands of morality upon mankind. – To recommend a goal to mankind is something quite different: the goal is then thought of as something which *lies in our discretion*; supposing the recommendation appealed to mankind, it could in pursuit of it also *impose* upon itself a moral law.... Up to now the moral law has been supposed to stand *above* our own likes and dislikes: one did not want actually to *impose* this law upon oneself, *have it commanded to one* from somewhere.

Nietzsche, *Daybreak*. 1881

Nietzsche's far-reaching critique of metaphysics, of philosophy's claim to provide access to a realm of objective truth and universal values, has placed him at the centre of debates on the nature of the postmodern turn in Western thought. It is only recently, however, that any attempt has been made to examine the significance of his deconstruction of the philosophical tradition for political theory. An impasse on the question of Nietzsche's status as a political thinker was reached by commentators adopting the practice of reading his overt neo-conservative politics back into his philosophy of power in an effort to discredit the philosophical site on which he had constructed his political edifice. Yet for anyone aware of the pivotal role that Nietzsche's writings have come to play in contemporary debates in critical theory, poststructuralism and deconstruction, his status as a political thinker poses an enigma in need of explanation and enlightenment.

Two recent studies – Mark Warren's *Nietzsche and Political Thought* and William Connolly's *Political Theory and Modernity*¹ – place Nietzsche at the centre of a transition from a modern to a postmodern (or 'late modern' in the case of Connolly) perspective in political theory. The ideas of a thinker whose political philosophy most students of the subject would regard as little more than an aesthetic-cultural ideology which prefigures, in its cult of strong leadership and contempt for the mass of humanity, a Fascist style of politics, are given a radical turn. Warren's study is by far the most original attempt yet to explain the radical disjunction which commentators have argued exists between Nietzsche's progressive and emancipatory philosophical insights and his regressive and debilitating politics, probably best captured in the phrase 'aristocratic radicalism' coined by the Danish critic and first person ever to lecture on Nietzsche, Georg

Brandes.² In his highly imaginative reconstruction of the relation between Nietzsche and political thought, Warren attempts to explain the disjunction between Nietzsche's radical critique of the Platonic-Christian tradition and his neo-conservative politics by arguing that there exists no necessary logical connection between the two. Rather, Nietzsche's politics only follow from his philosophy of power if we accept along with it several uncritical assumptions about the nature and limits of politics in modern societies (such as, for example, that all societies, ancient and modern, require a rigid and institutionalised division of labour and order of rank in which society is divided into masters and slaves). From this argument that Nietzsche's philosophy of power can be fruitfully disengaged from his politics, Warren puts forward the position that Nietzsche's philosophy of power provides the starting point for articulating a postmodern conception of human agency.

The postmodern turn in Western thought which we are witnessing at present poses a major challenge to the radical political discourse of modernity that unites Rousseau and Kant with Hegel and Marx. The aim is to *privilege* a Nietzschean perspective in order to shift the boundaries of political thought, a privileging which takes place by jettisoning the Marxist project of modernity – that of creating, in Rousseau's phrase and echoed by Marx, a 'form of association' in which the free development of each has become a precondition for



the free development of all;³ the construction of an ethico-political community in which the 'I' and the 'We' are united, and in which the antinomies of modern political thought, of individualism and communitarianism, of egalitarianism and libertarianism, have been overcome. This radical political project is replaced by a Nietzschean-inspired aestheticism in which the chief goal of existence becomes, in Nietzsche's words, one of 'giving style to one's character'.⁴ This aestheticism is apparent in Connolly's deconstruction of the political discourse of modernity and constitutes the major motif of Michel Foucault's last work.

In this essay I want to critically examine the claims made on behalf of Nietzsche's alleged 'post-modern' critique of political reason. I shall suggest that the attempt, à la Warren, to arrive at a postmodern political theory based on a synthesis of Kant's ethics and Nietzsche's philosophy of power is much more problematic than his argument suggests, and that, contra Connolly, the significance of Nietzsche's thought for political theory does not simply consist in its aestheticisation of ethics and politics. It resides in its questioning of the way in which individuals socially construct their ethical and political identities.

Human Agency: A Critical Postmodernism?

The concept of nihilism plays a key role in Warren's reconstruction of the relation between Nietzsche and political thought. He argues that nihilism primarily denotes a crisis of human agency in which there exists a disjunction between the individual's actual experience of the world and his or her interpretation of that experience. Thus, Nietzsche's guiding question is that of how human beings are able to be subjects of action, 'historically effective and free individuals, in a world in which subjectivity is unsupported by transcendent phenomena or metaphysical essences' (p. 7). It is in the context of the problem of European nihilism that Warren introduces his reading of the doctrine of will to power. The will to power is to be understood in terms of an account of how human agency is possible. The significance of understanding nihilism in the context of the will to power lies in the fact that nihilism signifies a profound crisis of human agency.

The most important question concerning Warren's reconstruction is why Nietzsche's philosophy – as opposed to say Rousseau's or Marx's – is deemed to be the most apposite to the tasks of a critical postmodern political theory. Warren's answer is that, although Nietzsche does not provide us with either a systematic or a coherent political theory (let alone a vision of political emancipation, as in Rousseau, or 'total human emancipation', as in Marx,⁵ it is only with his philosophy of power that we have the possibility of a *postmodern* political theory which offers a conception of human agency that explicitly breaks with the metaphysical assumptions of modern political thought in which we find a conception of human agency that rests on both transcendental and teleological foundations. It is this central claim of Warren's reconstruction of Nietzsche's thought that needs to be subjected to critical scrutiny. Many of the tensions of Warren's reconstruction of the relation between Nietzsche and political thought result from his adoption of a 'critical' postmodernism. Unlike Foucault, for example, Warren does not wish to completely abandon, or even place under erasure, the rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, he argues that these notions (that of an autonomous subjectivity, for example) need to be historicized. The significance of Nietzsche for political thought, according to this argument, is that it is Nietzsche who is the first to embark on a historiciza-



tion of the problem of human agency. Leaving aside the question of whether or not this claim is based on a legitimate reading of the history of modern political thought, it would appear that the appellation of postmodernism in Warren's formulation of a 'critical postmodernism' is somewhat misplaced. As several commentators have noted, Foucault's critique of humanism entails that notions of 'autonomy', 'subjectivity', and 'self-determination' lose their hegemony in political theory on account of their complicitness with the discourses of power/knowledge characteristic of modern disciplinary society.⁶

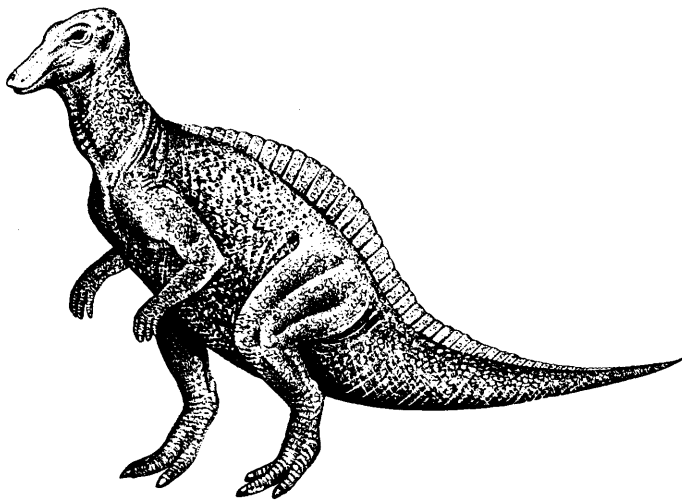
Instead of composing a language of emancipation, Foucault's postmodernism claims that the language of the Enlightenment constitutes a discourse of right which conceals a discourse of power in such an insidious way that it is a language which is implicated in the disciplinary forms of power of modernity in which the human subject is trained to accept responsibility for its 'free' actions. Contrary to the tradition of critical theory, Foucault does not make an appeal to the gap between appearance and reality, between, for example, the juridical ideals of bourgeois liberalism and the material reality of inequality and class rule in capitalist society. Foucault forecloses the possibility of any recourse to a critical notion of subjectivity since he argues that notions of autonomy and selfhood are integral components of the disciplinary society. As Peter Dews has noted,

... such a critique functions by counterposing to the limitations of existing democratic sovereignty a more adequate conception of collective self-determination which would promote the elimination of these discrepancies, whereas Foucault's argument is that any theory of sovereignty or self-determination must be abandoned, since the 'free subject' upon which such theories rely is in fact intrinsically heteronomous, constituted by power.⁷

Warren's use of the term postmodernism distorts his critical intentions to historicize, not abandon, these rationalist ideals. The great weakness of his highly imaginative but problematic reconstruction is that it fails to establish the relevance and importance of Nietzsche's philosophy of power for contemporary political theory by carrying out a systematic examination of the doctrine of will to power in relation to the tradition of modern political thought (Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and

Hegel), where it would be necessary to examine the notion in terms of questions about the nature of law and sovereignty; about the nature of political legitimacy and consent (in which a notion of the will has played such a crucial role); about the relationship between civil society and the state; and about the relationship between the universal and the particular. Because of this neglect Warren's major claims cannot be sustained. His major argument that Nietzsche is the first to break with the metaphysical assumptions of modern political thought and to historicize problems of human agency is never demonstrated, it is merely asserted.

The most important claims Warren makes concerning the relation between Nietzsche's critique of the tradition and a postmodern political theory rest on his interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy of power. He interprets the teaching of will to power not, as is most often the case, in terms of a



teaching of domination and lust to rule, but rather in terms of a 'critical ontology of practice' which attempts in Kantian fashion to explain how and under what conditions human agency is possible (p. 111). The human agent (what Nietzsche refers to as the 'sovereign individual')⁸ is not something given. Thus, what politics simply takes for granted, Warren argues – individuals constituted as agents and in possession of free will, conscience, and responsibility (in a word, autonomy) – is that which is most in need of explanation. Traditionally this has been done by constructing transcendental and teleological forms of discourse (God, Spirit, History, etc.). Nietzsche's innovation consists in conceiving human agency in terms of a fragile, contingent possibility dependent upon historical and cultural practices for its realization. One of the most original and contentious aspects of Warren's reading is its claim that the will to power does not denote what it is most often taken to denote, namely a psychological metaphysics which posits a universal and ahistorical desire for power (either over oneself or over others). This reading, it is argued, misses a crucial aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy of power, namely that it does not rely on a conception of a unified essence (the self) which lies concealed in noumenal fashion behind all phenomena (a metaphysical doer behind the deed). This means that, instead of taking human agency as sociologically given, political theory has to view it in terms of a historical achievement.

In the formulation 'will to power' the notion of 'will' serves to indicate the self-reflective nature of individual agency, so that what it means to define oneself as an agent, as

a self, depends on one's experiences of power, in particular, one's capacity to organise power as subjectivity. 'Power', on the other hand, simply denotes the actuality of the will. Self-identity is constituted through the individual's capacity to command its own will as a 'will' to power.⁹ Warren's reading of the will to power departs from previous ones by arguing that rationality and universality are essential components of the notion. Agency emerges as the central category in this reconstruction. It is defined as rational self-knowledge 'to the degree that its worldly conditions of possibility are met in practice' (p. 129). The illusion of agency which characterises Christian-moral culture is produced by the grounds of willing being transferred from the social and historical world to a metaphysical beyond. Warren describes Nietzsche's aim as one of wishing to remove the ideals of individuality, freedom, and reflexive rationality from the realm of metaphysics into the realm of historical possibilities. It is for this reason (the historicization of Kant) that Warren claims that Nietzsche's philosophy of power points towards a critical postmodern political thought. Nietzsche's analysis of power entails, it is argued, that human motives and desires are 'necessarily self-reflective in nature: humans are fundamentally motivated by a desire to experience the self as autonomous, as a free will' (p. 141). As autonomy of the self, the will to power is a universal motive of action and a universal value of self-reflective beings. He describes this project as a critical postmodernism because it wishes to retain belief in the value of reflexive rationalist ideals, but at the same time wishes to historicize their conditions of possibility. Precisely how this project differs from a critical *Marxism* is never explained.

From his reading of the will to power as an ontology of praxis Warren attempts to derive a Nietzschean social and political morality with which to inform his postmodernism. However, this leads to some very strange and hybrid ethico-political conceptions being put forward as the (postmodern) solution to the antinomies of modern political thought: namely, an improbable and undesirable attempt to marry Nietzsche's philosophy of power with Kant's ethics.

Nietzsche's philosophy of power, Warren contends, draws into question the entire tradition of modern political thought. It does so because modern political thought relies on metaphysical assumptions about individuals as agents. Within the tradition we find idealized constructs (society) and idealized agents (individuals), while a knowledge of the material conditions under which agents become free and rational beings is neglected. Both liberalism and Marxism, the two dominant political discourses of modernity, fail to relate rationalist ideals to historical conditions of possibility. In the case of Marxism, Warren points to its failure to explain the problem of agency in the formation of a rational and revolutionary class consciousness (p. 153). With Nietzsche, however, agency is for the first time problematized as a historical question. Warren makes the following astonishing claim:

Nietzsche is the first to break explicitly and completely with the Cartesianism of modern rationalism, to view the subject as a problem, and to distinguish clearly between the moral ideas of rationalism and its metaphysical foundations (p. 155).

To dispense with modernist assumptions about human agency and to embrace a critical postmodernism is to accept the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics while retaining a commitment to the value of rationalist ideals. When disentangled from the fatality of his (premodern) politics, Nietzsche's (post-modern) philosophy provides the logical ground for the

transition from a modern to a postmodern perspective in political theory.

Warren makes several substantive claims on behalf of this postmodern conjunction of rationalism and historicism, best viewed in terms of a marriage of Kant and Nietzsche which posits the universality of the value of power, where power is understood as reflexive subjectivity. Firstly, it is suggested that there is no longer any ontological polarity between agents and society or between agents and history, 'since Nietzsche sees individual agency as enabled by social attributes and achieved as history'. Secondly, it is suggested that there is no longer any valuative opposition between power and morality, 'for Nietzsche sees morals as one category of the many valuations that enable or disable power as agency'. Thirdly, it is suggested that one can conceive of a pluralistic society in which 'egalitarianism underwrites individuality and in which politics is an arena allowing agency to be developed and manifested' (p. 157). Warren proposes to construct a Nietzschean social and political morality from the individual's reflexive need for power, where power is conceived not as a principle of domination but rather in terms of self-constitution, as subjectivity. Although he acknowledges the vagueness of this morality he suggests that, if one followed his construal of the logic of power, and despite Nietzsche's own refusal to specify what a new positive and post-Christian morality would look like, it would bear close resemblance to a Kantian kingdom of ends where the production of sovereign individuality is combined with respect for persons as ends and not merely as means (p.p. 175-76). A critical postmodern political theory is informed by the following vision of society:

It would be *individualistic* in that experiences of individual agency – the power of the individual over his or her future – would be the goal of the good polity. Because individuation cannot occur in isolation, this goal implies the complementary values of communal intersubjectivity. Individuation is in many ways a collective achievement (p. 247).

It is difficult not to see Warren's 'critical postmodernism' as built on little more than sociological platitudes. His reconstruction of Nietzsche's central philosophical concepts is remarkably eclectic. The will to power, for example, is described at one point as standing 'halfway between Kant's critical philosophy and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, while exhibiting a materialism of the sort one finds in Marx' (p. 111). But this characterisation illuminates nothing by purporting to tell us everything, and succeeds only in exemplifying the worst kind of intellectual tourism so prevalent these days in Nietzsche commentary. Warren's reconstruction of the relation between Nietzsche and political thought both misconstrues the fundamental problematic of the tradition of modern political thought and the nature of Nietzsche's challenge to that tradition.

Nietzsche and Modern Political Thought

Although Warren concedes that Nietzsche's philosophy of power offers no more than a preface to a postmodern political theory, he does make Nietzsche the pivotal figure in the transition from a modern to a postmodern perspective on human agency and subjectivity. But the book's major claim that Nietzsche is the first to break explicitly with the metaphysical assumptions of the tradition of modern political thought is astonishing when viewed in the light of Marx's critique of the tradition of possessive individualism.

Marx's critique focuses on the illusion of sovereign individuality produced by conceiving the person as a bearer of political rights and privileges (namely, property rights, hence 'possessive' individualism) prior to any social and historical formation. For Marx the illusion of ahistorical individuality is not simply an illusion of metaphysics, but rather an illusion of a specific social formation, of what Marx following Hegel calls civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). Marx is just as radical as Nietzsche in conceiving the individual as a specific and ambiguous historical achievement. Moreover, Marx is sharply critical of any attempt by political theory to establish the 'will' as the basis of 'right' as it would fail to recognise and acknowledge the determination of the will by specific social and historical practices. It is in this context that Marx speaks of the 'aesthetic illusion of the small and big Robinsonades' who regard 'the Individual not as an historical result, but as the starting point of history'.¹⁰ Marx sees the task of a critical political theory to be one of exposing the 'juridical illusion' produced by civil society which reduces law to the representation of the will.¹¹ He prefigures, therefore, in his critique of the will, Nietzsche's transition from 'metaphysics' to 'morals', although it should be said that for Marx the term 'morals' refers not to any natural relations of supremacy and domination, but rather to historically specific relations of production, relations which are independent of an abstract and reified 'will'.¹²

The economic domination of individuals, which rests on their separation and alienation from one another within the relations of production established by modern capitalism (which in turn creates the juridical illusion of free, equal, and rational legal subjects) is the determining feature of modernity for Marx. Thus, the fundamental task of political theory becomes that of a revolutionary praxis, that is, of making the transition from the abstract and isolated 'I' of the bourgeois epoch to the concrete and united 'We' of a future, undetermined post-bourgeois epoch. However, the problem of making the step from the 'I' to the 'We' becomes especially acute for Marxism, when full cognisance is taken of Marx's insight that individuals are determined socially and historically by relations of production which are independent of their will.¹³ How can the actuality of these relations be acknowledged and changed if not via an act of will?



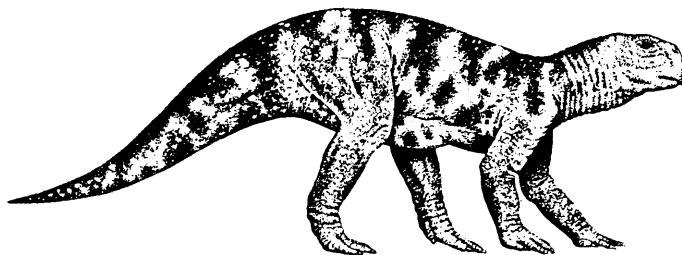
The central problematic of modern political thought, as Marx conceives it, is not so much that of how sovereign individuality is possible (civil society has made that ambiguous achievement possible), but rather how, on this basis, political subjectivity understood as collective rational autonomy is possible ('the necessary solidarity of the free development of all', as Marx puts it).¹⁴ It is this problem which has been of major concern to the tradition of Western Marxism beginning with Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*. It is now widely recognised that Lukacs's solution to the problem of political subjectivity in the form of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history is as inadequate as Rousseau's notion of the wise Legislator from which it is derived. What is missing from both Rousseau and Marx is a theory of political practice which can explain the formation of a collective rational autonomous subject. Although Marx recognised that the reality of capital would persist in determining the antinomical nature of our thought and action, he did not theorise Rousseau's legacy in the form of a political practice, but instead reduced the political in his writings to an epiphenomenal status where politics becomes little more than the technical administration of nature and resources.¹⁵ But without this theorisation of a political practice, Marxism becomes little more than an abstract demand for self-sacrifice and a reflection of Rousseau's awkward challenge to the possessive individual of civil society that it imposes on itself a universal law of morality which it is to regard not as the negation of its individuality and liberty but rather as the realisation of these ideals.

It is in this context of the major problematic of the radical tradition of modern political thought uniting Rousseau and Marx that we can locate the nature of Nietzsche's challenge to political theory. From a certain reading of Rousseau and Kant, Nietzsche takes up the problem of the relation between autonomy and morality, between the particular and the universal. He argues that in a world where God is dead (and which can stand as a metaphor for modernity, secularisation, the iron cage, after virtue, etc.) the problem of modern individuality, of the individual who is faced with the demand for universality, will either result in the strong supra-moral individual who succeeds in transcending society altogether (the Overman), or the weak individual who is full of rancour and resentment towards him/herself for failing to live up to the moral strictures of this severe morality, and who at the same time manifests his or her resentment towards the world and all forms of otherness in the form of a negative and destructive slave morality (the herd). Nietzsche's philosophy of power is not designed to take us beyond the moment of power (the war of all against all) to the moment of the political (the moment of recognition and reciprocity, or community), but instead leaves us with the informative, but somewhat disabling, choice between the Overman and the herd.

Warren's conception of power as subjectivity, which reflects the individual's reflexive need for autonomy, takes us back to the very beginnings of modern political thought, to the fundamental problem of how to make the transition from the 'I' to the 'We'. Power as subjectivity is an insufficient conception for constituting an ethical community in that each individual's desire for autonomy (*will to power*) could quite easily revert to a pre-political condition of war of all against all. Without some conception of a substantive ethical content (the universality of ethical life in Hegel, for example) subjectivity either remains trapped within itself (as in the beautiful soul) or faced with the constant threat of a Hobbesian warlike state of nature breaking out. The attempt to supply an ethical

content by resorting to Kant's notion of a kingdom of ends as a way of supplementing Nietzsche's philosophy of power reveals a crucial weakness in Warren's reconstruction of the relation between Nietzsche and political thought, in so far as it underestimates the gulf which separates Kant and Nietzsche's thinking on autonomy. In contrast to both Rousseau and Kant who posit self-mastery in terms of a universalizable law,¹⁶ Nietzsche posits the mutual exclusivity of autonomy and morality. Nothing could be more alien to his 'morality of strenuousness' than the notion of a kingdom of ends.¹⁷ The novelty of Nietzsche's position is not that he is the first to show human agency in the form of sovereign individuality to be a historical achievement, a product of socialization and historicization (surely this achievement belongs to Rousseau), but rather that he envisages sovereign individuality as an achievement of a labour of self-overcoming (one has earned the *right* to make promises, Nietzsche says).¹⁸ It is this essentially aristocratic understanding which distinguishes Nietzsche's conceptions of selfhood and individuality from the Christian egalitarianism which informs Rousseau and Kant's thinking on the will and autonomy.

Although Nietzsche accepts that the capacity for self-legislation, the ability to impose a law upon oneself that one



has freely chosen, and to be judge and avenger of that law, is the defining feature of modernity, he insists that this law can never be universalized. Although he recognises individuality in its modern form to be the result of a specific historical labour, he argues *against* Rousseau and Kant that

A virtue has to be *our* invention, *our* most personal defence and necessity... The profoundest laws of preservation and growth demand the reverse of Kant: that each one of us should devise *his own* virtue and *his own* categorical imperative.¹⁹

For Nietzsche the essence of what it means to declare oneself 'new, unique, and incomparable' is that action, one's will to power, is non-universalizable and non-generalizable.²⁰ Nietzsche resists the temptation to universalize law, insisting that such an impulse reflects an attempt by the weak to overcome the strong, either through advocating the value of pity as a panacea to man's ills or through the fiction of free and equal individuals in the notion of a social contract. The Kantian demand that we should universalize the maxims of our actions in the form of a categorical imperative is regarded by Nietzsche both as an act of cruelty on the self and in terms of an ultimate act of selfishness on the part of a slave consciousness which announces its sovereign individuality to the world by declaring that everybody should act as it does.

Warren's arguments in favour of postmodernity presup-

pose an entire history of modern political thought. His somewhat casual dismissal of this tradition – it is simply absurd to argue that prior to Nietzsche no thinker had broken with metaphysical assumptions about the ego, the self, and agency – means that his argument on the need for a reconciliation of Nietzsche's philosophy of power and Kantian ethics simply takes us back to the beginning of modern political thought and its fundamental problematic. If the criterion for distinguishing between 'modern' and 'postmodern' political theory is to be located in whether or not a theory conceives of the problem of agency in metaphysical or historical terms, it becomes impossible to understand precisely where Nietzsche's challenge to Marx is supposed to lie. In this respect Warren's use of the term postmodernism to signal the break with metaphysical understandings of human agency is deeply mystifying. His central argument that Nietzsche is the postmodern political thinker *par excellence* because he is the first to break with the metaphysical assumptions of modern political thought by viewing the individual subject as the product of a historical labour of culture and civilization simply cannot be sustained.

Aesthetics and Politics

Connolly is much more apposite than Warren in recognising that Nietzsche's challenge to political theory lies in casting suspicion and doubt on the fundamental impulse behind the 'political' moment in modern political thought: the search for a rational community of free and equal beings. This recognition allows Connolly an admirable sensitivity regarding the ethical dilemmas facing political thought and practices in 'late modernity' (to use Connolly's own terminology). Inspired by Foucault's reading of modernity, Connolly argues that Nietzsche brings into radical doubt the philosophical certainties and comforts on which the major thinkers of the tradition (Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx) constructed their elaborate politico-philosophical systems. He thus proposes that we privilege a Nietzschean perspective in order to shift the boundaries of political thought, not in order to leap into some unknown and ill-defined postmodern condition, but to rethink and revalue the problematic of modernity.

The importance of Nietzsche for rethinking the relation between political theory and modernity, according to Connolly, is to be found in his recognition and affirmation of the phenomenon of otherness without desiring to incorporate it in some grand dialectical system of thought. Both Hegel and Marx, it is argued, promote

an ontology in which otherness can be dissolved into higher unities; neither affirms one in which every project and achievement engenders otherness as it realises itself ... each advances a theory which supports suppression and subjugation in the name of realization for the self and the community (p. 132).

The advent of the reign of nihilism in the West, which Nietzsche illuminated for us in such ominous terms, allows us to recognise the illusions and myths which have inspired the project of modern political theory: the drive for self and social transparency, the desire to see ourselves reflected in a world we have made by mastering and dominating everything which comes under our control. Things which escape our control are simply defined and delimited as 'forms of otherness' in need of normalization: madness, irrationality, perversity, chaos and disorder, etc. (p. 13). The Rousseauesque desire for an ethico-political community based on equality and liberty, and inherited by Marxism, is, according to this reading of nihil-

ism, little more than a desire for a perfectly transparent world in which the self and society have at last become 'known' to themselves. This radical project of modernity, Connolly argues, offers no more than a depoliticized ideal of modern life in which politics becomes reduced to a mere technical means for achieving the common good (p.p. 129-131). On Rousseau he writes:

The Rousseauian vision collapses, not because it is impossible for some to have faith in it, but because its faith is not generalizable in the modern age in which it is offered. Its eloquence can speak only to some; its vision is a nightmare to many (p. 66).

The desire for unity and singularity expressed in the search for a common good can only result in a totalitarian denial and rejection of forms of otherness which necessarily result from this quest.

For Connolly then, the modern project of freedom and emancipation is caught up in an imperialistic discourse of mastery and domination which is blind to its own uncritical assumptions about the self and the world. For Connolly, any set of norms or standards that becomes endowed with authority and legitimacy is an ambiguous achievement in that it will necessarily succumb to the temptation of establishing its own hegemony by excluding and denigrating that which does not fit into its confines.²¹ In place of tolerating ambiguity, we prefer the discipline of harmony through positing the ideal of a self-inclusive community. Like Foucault, Connolly also has a deep suspicion towards notions of the integrated and harmonious self for such integration and harmony is always achieved at the expense of a form of otherness which has been subjugated to achieve the goal of unity and harmony. The great strength of Nietzsche, he argues, is that the absence of a political theory in his ethical and political thinking allows him the advantage over other modernists of being able to examine the presumptions of modernity without advocating in advance a single theory of politics (p. 168). Thus, unlike Warren, Connolly does not view the lack of a coherent or systematic political theory in Nietzsche in terms of a lacuna in need of reconstruction, but rather the source of a virtue in thinking about the problems of late modernity without the certainties provided by totalising and foundational philosophical systems. With the thought of will to power Nietzsche provides us with a counter-ontology of resistance which puts into doubt the anthropomorphism of the modern ethos that the world is susceptible to human mastery and the quest for a unified community (p. 134 and p. 169).

For those accustomed to reading Nietzsche's will to power in terms of a philosophy of domination, Connolly's reading of the notion in terms of a counter-ontology or resistance, providing a highly useful counterpoint to the models of mastery and domination regarded as prevalent in the political discourse of modernity, will come as a revelation. Whatever final scholarly conclusions are reached on the question of the status of the notion of will to power in Nietzsche's writings – whether it denotes the domination and exploitation regarded by Nietzsche as intrinsic to the dynamics of life as such, or whether it denotes the more noble ideal of self-mastery²² – Connolly's unorthodox and imaginative interpretation of the doctrine is to be regarded as a welcome addition to the literature. However, it should be said that Connolly does recognise the inadequacy of Nietzsche's politics for thinking about the competing demands and aporias of late modernity. Nietzsche attempted to conceive of a new ethics and politics beyond the spirit of revenge and resentment which characterizes modern politics' inheritance of the slave revolt in morals,

and which rests on egalitarian demands for justice. However, he did not recognize that the demand for justice is based on the reality of economic exploitation and political oppression. As a result of this lacuna in his political thinking, Connolly argues, we require a post-Nietzschean political theory made up of Nietzsche's ontology of otherness *and* an independent reflection into the plight of late modernity (p. 171). Some conception of justice, where justice refers not just to one virtue amongst many but rather to the structure of society and the organisation of society's resources, in the manner of Rawls for example, is central to late modern political life in a way which is a complete anathema to Nietzsche's politics and its exclusion of any notion of social empowerment. Thus, Connolly argues, a late modern political perspective

would appreciate the reach of Nietzschean thought as well as its sensitivity to the complex relations between resentment and the production of otherness, but it would turn the genealogist of resentment on his head by exploring democratic politics as a medium through which to expose resentment and to encourage the struggle against it (p. 175)

As a political 'solution' to the problems of late modernity Connolly calls for a 'reconstituted, radicalized liberalism', which is a liberalism that is able to cope with the competing demands of otherness and subjugation, individuality and communality, as well as one which challenges the hegemony of the idea that economic expansion is a precondition of liberty (the idea of socialist abundance is rejected as one of the notions lying behind modernity's drive for mastery and domination).

Connolly's critique of the tradition culminates in a conception of an ethic of 'letting be' in which difference and otherness can be allowed to exist in their own terms. A brave ethic is needed to replace the discredited political discourse on modernity. However, this aestheticisation of ethics and politics rests on a spurious opposition between Nietzsche and the tradition of modernity. When translated into concrete terms this brave ethic becomes little more than an aesthetic of the decentred self in which the chief goal is 'to give style to one's character', understood by Connolly to include such revolutionary adjustments in one's behaviour as changes in diet, exercise, reading habits, etc.! (p. 163). Not only is this

ethic, as Connolly admits, vague, it is entirely vacuous. Are we seriously being invited to believe that an aesthetics of the self can simply be divorced from the class (and race and gender) structures of late modern capitalism? The reference to one freely choosing and changing one's diet and reading habits is risible. Is not Connolly's deconstruction of the tradition of modern political thought something of a caricature? Can the entire project of modernity simply be reduced to a quest for a perfectly ordered self and a perfectly ordered society in complete harmony with one another? What of Hegel's attempt to reconcile antiquity and modernity by conceiving of a form of ethical life which could reconcile the competing demands of modernity for absolute freedom on the one hand and the need for social differentiation on the other? Is it desirable that we simply abandon the aspiration for a 'form of association' in which there is an identity between individuals in a self-constituting community, based on the democratic values of liberty and equality, in favour of a vague 'brave ethic' in which the chief purpose of life is one of giving style to one's character?

While the attempt to construct a politics of difference as a way of moving beyond the assumptions of modernity about technology and domination represents an original contribution to political theory, the attempt to deploy Nietzsche as a major critic of the political discourse of modernity through an aesthetic reading of his notion of character sets up a spurious opposition between Nietzsche and the tradition, and ignores the fact that Nietzsche's concern with forms of sovereign individuality is as much a concern with law and sovereignty as it is with art and aesthetics.

Nietzsche's Challenge to Political Theory

The turn to Nietzsche in recent years as a way of moving beyond the paradigm of modernity has drawn on his notion of character in terms of style, but it has bowdlerised his thinking in such a way as to deprive it of its political import. This is clearly evident, for example, in a work such as Alexander Nehamas's *Life as Literature*.²³ Warren's and Connolly's reconstructions of the question of the relationship between Nietzsche and political thought are important because they take Nietzsche's work seriously for questioning the assumptions of modernity, understood as a *political* project, and moving beyond them.

In contrast to both Warren and Connolly, I would suggest that Nietzsche's challenge to political theory is a great deal more subtle and sophisticated than they allow. I agree with them that any contemporary deployment of Nietzsche's thinking for advancing a postmodern political theory has to relinquish its original aristocratic pretensions. But Nietzsche challenges political theory on a number of levels. At his most disconcerting and disquieting he suggests that the ambition of modern political theory to reconcile the particular and the universal (autonomy and morality) – whether through the fiction of a social contract or through some form of utopian politics – represents no more than a slave revolt in morality in which the weak seek to convert the strong to the value of liberal and democratic virtues (equality, for example). He produces a theory of culture in which he historicises this problem, and in which his political thought looks forward to a new and higher type of noble morality. However, Nietzsche's political thought does not envisage any kind of universalistic solution to the problem of modernity and nihilism, whether in the form of a Kantian kingdom of ends, Marxian-inspired socialism, or a radicalised liberalism. In fact, nowhere does Nietzsche link his insights into culture and history with a



phenomenology of political form. What concerned him most was the need for historical change through strong aristocratic leadership.

The key question of Nietzsche's political thinking concerns how we create a common ethico-political identity; that is, how we constitute ourselves as social beings. His distinction between master and slave moralities is crucial here. The distinction revolves around two different ways of constructing an ethical identity: master morality denotes a morality of strength and courage resting on the affirmation of its own uniqueness and distinction; by contrast, slave morality, a morality of weakness and internalised will to power, is a morality which can only define itself through negating everything which is other and different to itself. The slave consciousness is thoroughly dependent on the existence of the Other which it must first of all negate, and define as 'evil', in order to affirm its own superior identity. It is with a slave morality that the will to power, understood as a striving for something the will lacks, namely power, takes on the form of a will for supremacy and domination. The importance of this thinking in otherness and difference for a feminist political practice has been shown by Rosalyn Diprose in a recent essay in *Radical Philosophy*.²⁴

Nietzsche is highly suspicious, not of community, but of the way in which notions of common identity are arrived at in the political discourse of modernity. In Rousseau, for example, a common morality is constructed on the basis of the value of pity (conceived in terms of a law of the heart).²⁵ Nietzsche attacks Rousseau's sentimentalism since it posits a common ethico-political identity on the basis of human weakness and dependence; it cannot serve as the basis for a positive morality which is genuinely creative and within which sovereign individuality can flourish. For Nietzsche, a Rousseauian-inspired politics could only culminate in a complete obliteration of otherness and difference. A similar line of argument lies behind his harsh critique of Kant. In Kant the notion of a kingdom of ends rests on a totally abstract concept of universal rationality. The only common identity achieved is one of formal equality. But this, according to Nietzsche, is the perfect example of a slave morality in which the individual arrives at a notion of its independence and strength by making the other recognise the value of a morality of weakness through positing a formal and abstract identity of equality between individuals (I would like to treat you as an end in itself, the Kantian self declares in a kingdom of ends, because I wish you to treat *me* as an end in itself as I am too weak to affirm myself in all my uniqueness and independence).²⁶

Nietzsche's conception of sovereign individuality is political through and through. In contrast to Foucault's last work, in which he attempts to formulate a new aesthetic ethics by separating art and law,²⁷ Nietzsche conceives of the modern self in terms of a synthesis of the aesthetic and the juridical. This is why he speaks of sovereign individuals who want to become what they are, unique and incomparable, and who create themselves and their own laws.²⁸ He understands historical development in terms of a transition from the morality of custom which cultivates a sense of political obligation, to the autonomous and supra-moral sovereign individual who is compelled to live beyond the old morality. His critique of Rousseau and Kant is that their philosophies provide us only with a modern rationalisation of traditional morality in which we are spared the task of creating ourselves and our common identities by engaging in a labour of self-overcoming and self-legislation (which can never be a legislation *for all*). The decisive question Nietzsche raises concerns the basis on which sovereign individuals, emancipated from the moral-

ity of custom, are to enter into social relationships and construct ethical and political identities. His critique of law is not, therefore, a critique of sovereignty as such (as Foucault argues). Rather, his refusal to replace a discourse on force with one on the principles of political right rests on the recognition that the determining feature of modernity is the absence of any legitimate claim to ethical universality.²⁹ In this way, Nietzsche's political thought aims to keep open the question of power and its legitimacy.

Notes

I would like to thank Peter Dews and Peter Osborne for reading an earlier draft of this essay and for their helpful comments.

- 1 Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1988); William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988). Page numbers in the text refer to these two books.
- 2 Georg Brandes, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (London, Heinemann, 1914).
- 3 See J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London, Dent, 1973), Book 1, Chapter 6: 'The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.'
- 4 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (henceforth *GS*), trans. Kaufmann (NY, Random House, 1974), section 290: 'To "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.'
- 5 On 'total human emancipation' see K. Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975), pp. 211-243.
- 6 See, for example, Nancy Fraser, 'Foucault. A Young Conservative?' in *Ethics*, Vol. 96, October 1985, pp. 165-184.
- 7 Peter Dews, 'Power and Subjectivity in Foucault', *New Left Review*, No. 144, March-April 1984, p. 67.
- 8 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 2, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (NY, Random House, 1967). Essay II of *GM* begins by posing the question of how the sovereign individual of political theory, that is, the self who has a free will and thereby is able to make promises and be bound to social contracts and obligations, is possible: 'To breed an animal *with the right to make promises* – is not this the paradoxical task nature has set itself in the case of man? Is this not the real problem regarding man?'
- 9 Although Heidegger insisted in his reading of Nietzsche that the doctrine of the will to power is to be understood in terms of its consummation of the modern Cartesian metaphysics of subjectivity, he also provides, I would argue, one of the best accounts of the doctrine in terms of a phenomenology of action. See M. Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (NY, Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 53-115.
- 10 K. Marx, 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy', in Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p. 124.
- 11 Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 81 and pp. 106-07.
- 12 See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (NY, Random House, 1966), 19: 'In all willing it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis ... of a social structure composed of many "souls". Hence a philosopher should claim the right to include willing within

- the sphere of morals (*der Moral*) – morals being understood as the doctrine of the relations of supremacy (*Herrschafts-Verhaeltnissen*) under which the phenomenon of “life” comes to be.’
- 13 See K. Marx, ‘The 1859 Preface to A Critique of Political Economy’, in *Early Writings*, pp. 424-29.
 - 14 See Marx, *The German Ideology*, pp. 117-18. On this characterisation of Marx’s project see John Harris, ‘Socialism and Democracy: Beyond State and Civil Society’, *Radical Philosophy*, No. 45, Spring 1987, pp. 13-23, especially pp. 20-22.
 - 15 See Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book II, Chapter 7. ‘For a young people to be able to relish sound principles of political theory and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit, which should be created by these institutions, would have to preside over their very foundation; and men would have to be before law what they should become by means of law.’ Marx replaces this riddle with another one on the proletariat conceived as ‘a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society’. See Marx, ‘Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. An Introduction’, in *Early Writings*, p. 256. In uniting Rousseau and Marx in terms of a radical political theory, I am following the argument put forward by Lucio Colletti in his *From Rousseau to Lenin*, trans. John Merrington (NY, Monthly Review Press, 1974), p. 185. ‘My thesis is that revolutionary political theory, as it has developed since Rousseau, is already foreshadowed and contained in *The Social Contract*; or to be more explicit, that so far as “political” theory in the strict sense is concerned, Marx and Lenin have added nothing to Rousseau, except for the analysis (which is of course rather important) of the “economic bases” for the withering away of the State.’
 - 16 See Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter 8: ‘The mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law we prescribe to ourselves is liberty’; I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (NY, Harper & Row, 1964), p. 70: ‘I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that the maxim of my action should become a universal law.’ In comparing Rousseau and Kant in this way I am denying that there are important differences between them in their conceptions of self-legislation. Rousseau’s conception of self-mastery makes an appeal to the heteronomous aspects of our being, where Kant’s does not.
 - 17 I borrow the phrase, ‘morality of strenuousness’ from J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche* (Glasgow, Collins/Fontana, 1978), p. 89.
 - 18 Nietzsche, *GM*, II, 2.
 - 19 See F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966), section 11.
 - 20 Nietzsche, *GS*, Section 335.
 - 21 See Connolly’s previous work, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 138. A similar argument to Connolly’s concerning the imperialistic and totalitarian quest of modern political thought can be found in Bernard Yack’s study, *The Longing for Total Revolution. Philosophic Sources of Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton University Press, 1986). Yack argues that from Rousseau to Nietzsche modern thought has deluded itself into thinking that emancipation would follow from a ‘total revolution’ of existing society. Yack’s argument differs from Connolly’s in placing Nietzsche within the confines of the alleged totalitarian discourse of modern political theory. His hero is the late Hegel who, it is claimed, is the only thinker of modernity to recognise the limitations of historical reality and achieve a reconciliation with it. What amazes me most about deconstructions of the tradition of modern political thought, such as we find in Connolly and Yack, is that, despite their poststructuralist pretensions, they nevertheless end up by reading the tradition in terms of a single, monolithic narrative. They differ only in their choice of ‘goodies’ and ‘bad-dies’.
 - 22 For a one-sided reading of the will to power in terms of self-mastery see Walter Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche* (Princeton University Press, 1974, fourth edition), pp. 200-01; for a one-sided reading of the doctrine in terms of a teaching of domination see Stern’s *Nietzsche*, pp. 84-87. For a mediation between the two extremes see Ofelia Schutte’s *Beyond Nihilism. Nietzsche without Masks* (Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 76-105. For a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine see Wolfgang Mueller-Lauter, ‘Nietzsche Lehre vom Willen zur Macht’, *Nietzsche-Studien*, Band 3, 1974, pp. 1-60.
 - 23 A. Nehamas, *Nietzsche. Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985).
 - 24 R. Diprose, ‘Nietzsche, Ethics, and Sexual Difference’, *Radical Philosophy*, No. 52, Summer 1989, pp. 27-33. For an attempt to articulate a postmodern feminism see Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, ‘Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Postmodernism and Feminism’, in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-3, June 1986, pp. 373-94.
 - 25 See Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London, Dent, 1974), especially pp. 192-90.
 - 26 Nietzsche, *GM* I, 7-8.
 - 27 See M. Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, in Paul Rabinow, *A Foucault Reader* (Middlesex, Penguin, 1984), pp. 340-72. I offer a detailed reading of Foucault’s ethical turn in my paper, ‘Foucault and the Postmodern Turn in Political Theory’ (unpublished).
 - 28 Nietzsche, *GS*, 335.
 - 29 See Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), section 108.