Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico. Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critico*
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Jan Rehmann, *Postmoderner Links-Nietzscheanismus: Deleuze und Foucault; eine Dekonstruktion*
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OVER-MAN AND THE COMMUNE

Few thinkers have enjoyed such widespread appeal over the last forty years as Nietzsche. The instrumentalization of the Nazi period seemingly left behind—Lukács's dissenting voice notwithstanding—Nietzsche's almost Heraclitean metaphors and images, visceral incarnations of some mythological wisdom which always seems to be in excess of itself, have fascinated theorists from the whole range of the political spectrum. For some, such as Kaufmann and Rorty, Nietzsche dissolved philosophy into an aesthetic play and a relativism entirely in accord with, but lying beyond, the values of the liberal democracies. For others—in the so-called 'New Nietzsche' emerging from post-war France—his critique of the overweening pretensions of the western philosophical tradition seemed to offer the possibility to begin philosophy again, as a post-philosophy. While this current of interpretation was not too shy to appropriate some of Nietzsche's concepts for a radical critique of contemporary bourgeois society—one thinks in the first instance of Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze—its presupposition was that Nietzsche himself was an essentially apolitical philosopher, an innocent victim of

right-wing distortion whose 'indeterminacy' permitted an attempt to expropriate him for the Left.

More recently, attention has returned to Nietzsche as a political thinker, a tendency that has now received its most eloquent and exhaustive statement in Domenico Losurdo's monumental *Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico. Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critico*. Over 1,000 pages long, written in a lively and accessible prose and accompanied by an extensive bibliography, it will surely become an indispensable reference work for any serious future discussions of the philosopher of the eternal return. Nietzsche's politics appear here not as merely one element alongside others, to be relegated to specialist studies and leaving his standing as harbinger of the destruction of western metaphysics untouched. On the contrary, Losurdo forces Nietzsche to step forward in his own colours, as a philosopher *totus politicus*. His politics now figure not as unfortunate or ambiguous—depending upon one's perspective—pronouncements, alongside pregnant and brilliant aphorisms, but as the hidden anatomy which allows us to decipher the totality of his thought.

Losurdo is one of the most innovative and prolific left intellectuals of contemporary Italy. Born in 1941 in the *Mezzogiorno*, educated at the Universities of Urbino and Tübingen, he is currently *ordinario* (full professor) at the University of Urbino and regular commentator on contemporary Italian and international politics in his capacity as a member of *Rifondazione comunista*. He has produced a large body of scholarly work that aims at an analysis of European, and particularly German, philosophy and political thought, taking in Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and, appropriately, Gramsci, as well as Bonapartism, Italian Neo-Hegelianism and historical revisionism. At least two studies, now available in English—*Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West* (2001; Italian edition 1991) and *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns* (2004; Italian edition 1992)—have become fundamental reference works. A particular focus of Losurdo's more recent scholarship is the critical re-reading of the liberal tradition throughout the nineteenth century, informed by a two-fold aim: first, to provide an archaeology of a tradition that continues to dominate contemporary politics and cultural practice; and second, to encourage a reassessment and perhaps even revision of the Marxist tradition through an engagement with the findings of this research.

Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico represents the summation of Losurdo's long study of Nietzsche's work and the cultural and political environment in which it was formed. His principal thesis is that Nietzsche's thought, in all its stages and transformations, was fundamentally determined by a central engagement: the critique and denunciation of the tradition that derived from the French Revolution, traversed 1848, and arrived, in Nietzsche's youth, at the Paris Commune. In the opening pages we read the young

classicist's letter to Gersdorff of 21 June 1871, regarding news of the burning of the Louvre:

> For some days I was completely destroyed by doubts and overcome by tears: all scientific, philosophic and artistic existence seemed to me an absurdity, if a single day could obliterate the most marvellous works of art, or rather, entire periods of art.

Subsequent revelation that such reports had been merely malicious rumour aimed at discrediting the Communards seemed to do little to alter the profoundly traumatic and formative nature of the experience for Nietzsche. Several years later he was still writing: 'The same when the news of the supposed burning of the Louvre arrived—a feeling of the autumn of culture. Never a deeper pain.'

Such is the context in which Losurdo reads *The Birth of Tragedy*, first published in the spring of 1872. This reinterpretation of ancient Greek culture and philosophy has often been read as the opening shots of Nietzsche's solitary guerrilla war against the western philosophical tradition and, indeed, modernity in general, with its warning of 'barbaric slave revolts'. Through a careful comparative analysis of this text, along with others by Nietzsche from the same period and those of his contemporaries, Losurdo demonstrates that whatever else *The Birth of Tragedy* became, it must also be understood in its own historical moment, as a theoretical response to a specific political event—the uprising of the Commune—articulated within a constellation of ideologies which include various forms of anti-Semitism, secular and not-so-secular critiques of Christianity and conservative opposition to a consolidating transatlantic liberalism; all united by a belief in a redemptive Imperial German *Sonderweg* leading back to the virtues of pre-Enlightenment Greece. Although Nietzsche claimed to be a solitary thinker who did not enjoy a confidence with the currents of his time, Losurdo has meticulously recorded the wider social echoes that provided a context for his formulations during these decades. Thus, for instance, the terms of Nietzsche's critique of Socrates, singularly severe if considered in relation to the disciplinary etiquette of late nineteenth-century classical philology, become less exceptional when placed within earshot of the rhetoric of certain anti-Semitic currents of the time.

It was not long before Nietzsche repudiated the ideas of his youth, particularly the vehement anti-Semitism, Francophobia and German patriotism that had inspired him to volunteer as a 21-year-old stretcher-bearer in the Franco-Prussian War. With some slight variations in nuance and date, Losurdo follows the established tripartite division of Nietzsche's development into an early Wagnerite phase, an 'enlightened' turn to the French moralists, and a final immoralism dominated by the messianic figure of

Zarathustra. What distinguishes his account, however, is the attempt to demonstrate the fundamental underlying unity of these diverse orientations, all over-determined by Nietzsche's deepening hatred of working-class militancy and the concomitant radicalization of his original thesis. How to explain this hydra-like monstrosity, seemingly capable of bringing forth English women's suffragists no sooner than French Communards had been crushed? Other opponents of the Commune had been content to trace its lineage back to perfidious Jacobin demagogy. Nietzsche, however, remaining true to his traumatic experience, traced the origins of modernity's democratic degeneration much further. Not the French Revolution, the Reformation, or even the Greeks, but Judaic resentments—the base, 'Semitic' Adam against the 'Aryan' Prometheus—now constituted the source of a cycle of revolutionary movements that accompanied Europe as its original sin, preventing it from becoming itself. Similarly, there was a geographical displacement: if the Germany of the *Gründerjahre* would not fulfil its historical responsibilities, solace could be found, in different stages of Nietzsche's evolution, in the more authentically 'European' or *abendländisch* examples offered by French moralists, the antebellum American South, and Tsarist Russia.

At all stages, Nietzsche's quest was accompanied by the shadow of the socialist movement, as Losurdo demonstrates in detail. Thus he argues that Nietzsche's intertwined critiques of Christianity and the History of Philosophy were a response to the role that the former in particular played in the formation of the early socialist movement. The famous call for an amoralism, 'beyond good and evil', is analysed as emerging in opposition to socialist appeals to notions of justice and moral conduct; the call for a new slavery as the foundation for a higher civilization is placed in the context of the American Civil War and the abolitionist movement, and support for rule of a *Herrenvolk* over barbarians alongside anti-colonialist stirrings. Nietzsche's final position (insofar as the unstable constellation of competing elements which make up his thought can be regarded as reaching a final position) is seen as striving toward a 'radical aristocratic' critique of modernity, liberalism, notions of equality and the 'rights of man'.

Perhaps most contentiously, Losurdo's study has reopened the question of Nietzsche's relation to anti-Semitism. This aspect of the book has already caused a minor furore in Italy and, more recently, Germany, enticing Ernst Nolte into public debate with Losurdo. This has been largely due to Losurdo's philological critique of the approach of Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, editors of both the German and Italian critical editions of Nietzsche's work—and particularly of translation choices in the Italian edition. Losurdo contends that Colli and Montinari, in their urge to 'de-Nazify' the philosopher's image, have bent the stick too far in the other direction and obscured the true picture of Nietzsche's relation to questions

of Jewish culture and anti-Semitism in his own time. It should be stressed that Losurdo does not propose to 're-Nazify' Nietzsche; rather, he questions some of the less plausible explanations offered as to why Nietzsche could be appropriated by the ideology of National Socialism. In particular, he demolishes the myth that the traces of anti-Semitism were introduced by Nietzsche's sister; on the contrary, he maintains that, if anything, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche sought to make the posthumous image of her brother more palatable to enlightened bourgeois taste. Even though Nietzsche does break with the explicit and extreme anti-Semitism of his youth, Losurdo demonstrates that the theoretical structure of this ideology and its fellow travellers had an abiding influence on his thought—as amply evidenced in the call by the late Nietzsche, the prophet of the innocence of becoming, for the extermination of the weak and ill-born.

Il ribelle aristocratico thus cannot be regarded as a restatement, in hyper-philological mode, of the polemical thesis of Lukács's *Destruction of Reason*, despite its predictable identification as such by critics both hostile and friendly. Losurdo certainly defends Lukács's still misunderstood, over-determined intervention into the post-war debates on the role the German philosophical institution had played in the particular form of bourgeois hegemony that culminated in the Third Reich, against disingenuous attempts to allegorize away the socio-political core of such categories as the *Übermensch*. Yet he also takes his own cool distance from the impatience of Lukács's account, in both a philosophical and historiographical register. Lukács, still traumatized by the memory of the 30s, had treated Nietzsche as the penultimate product of a specifically German irrationalist tradition, unfolding from a founding instance in Schelling's mission to root out the dragonseed of Hegelianism, and necessarily culminating in National Socialism.

As Losurdo's comparative analysis demonstrates, Germany had no monopoly on 'radical aristocratic' reaction. In one form or another, from Burke and Carlyle to Tocqueville and Taine, a variant of this tendency emerged in almost all of the major European cultures throughout the long nineteenth century. There is little need for grand teleological sketches to associate Nietzsche with unpalatable doctrines: his own declarations, and the addresses of solidarity from contemporaries such as Brandes, suffice to prove the point. The connection of these pathologies of the *fin de siècle* with those lying on the other side of the deluge that engulfed bourgeois Europe in the Great War and October Revolution can only be comprehended adequately, Losurdo suggests, if the former are grasped as concrete *Konstellationen* in their own conjuncture, which were actively re-mobilized by related but distinct forces in a very different period, rather than declined *à la* History of Philosophy.

The distinctiveness of this thesis in the history of Nietzsche's reception, however, is not simply that it proposes a coherent political reading of his philosophical development—that is, one that seeks neither to praise nor to bury but to grasp, in Gramscian fashion, the political significance of a philosophy and the philosophical significance of a politics. Nietzsche's political attachments are shown to have left behind certain 'philosophical sediments' in each stage of his development—concepts, strategies, orientations, rhetorics—which were, in turn, re-translated into new political *prises de position*. But neither is Losurdo seduced by the force of Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical strategies into accepting Nietzsche at what might seem to be his own word, as he argues the 'school of the "hermeneutics of innocence"' has done. Rather, Nietzsche's categories are subjected to a rigorous critique based upon their historical conditions of emergence and their location within a determinant political *Kampfplatz*; comparison to the positions of Marx is a touchstone of Losurdo's study.

Such a historical-comparativist method might have provided the foundation for a critique of the ahistorical ways in which Nietzsche has been deployed by much post-structuralist theory over the last thirty years. Deleuze's influential coupling of Nietzsche with Spinoza, as like-minded philosophers of freedom, might have faltered before the evidence amassed by Losurdo of the contemporary meaning of Nietzsche's advocacy of slavery, no mere metaphor for life but a concrete response to anti-abolitionist debates. Yet the most curious aspect of this work, and one of its few real omissions, is the scarcity of reference to the Nietzschean-inspired or derivative work, much of it from the Left, of the last few decades. Asked about this in an interview, Losurdo quite legitimately responded that his study had been consciously confined to the largely neglected task of a reconstruction and historical contextualization of Nietzsche's thought; adding that an adequate treatment of this phase of Nietzsche's reception would have required another, quite different book. While this is undoubtedly true, it remains the case that the task of 'philological critique' has itself been as neglected as that of 'philological reconstruction'.

Fortunately, Losurdo's study has recently been complemented by Jan Rehmann's *Postmoderner Links-Nietzscheanismus: Deleuze und Foucault; eine Dekonstruktion*. Produced in a very different intellectual climate (Rehmann is *Privatdozent* at the Freie Universität in Berlin but currently resides in New York), this study, drawing in part upon Losurdo's reconstructive efforts, offers a detailed philological and political critique of the allegorical strategies that allowed Deleuze's and Foucault's readings to become highly influential for another generation of intellectuals traumatized by defeat. Appropriately, the metaphor best designed to capture this process is Marx's 'repetition as farce' rather than Nietzsche's 'eternal return', for whereas Nietzsche's rhetorical

figures were originally formulated as a contribution to a radical-aristocratic, explicitly political critique of modernity, the apolitical postmodern appropriation of Nietzsche has been largely an affair of the Left. Salutary in this sense is Rehmann's sharp critique of Deleuze's *Nietzsche et la philosophie* of 1962, the text in which the conceptual foundations for the 'New Nietzsche' were first laid; and, as Rehmann's comparative analysis of original texts convincingly proves, an anti-dialectical smithy *par excellence* in which already allegorical metaphors were reforged into seemingly harmless speculative concepts—the 'pathos of distance' of the powerful toward the lower orders in *Genealogy of Morals* quietly morphing into a valorized postmodern 'difference'.

Similarly, the Heideggerean inflections of Foucault's reading of Nietzsche are carefully weighed in the balance and found wanting, particularly where they were offered as 'overcoming' perspectives stemming from the Marxist tradition. Rehmann suggests, against the current, that Althusser's and Poulantzas's focus upon concrete state forms, rather than a ubiquitous 'will to power', allowed them to articulate a non-reductive concept of power better able to grasp neoliberalism's disciplinary procedures. Once again, Rehmann's focus is upon the weaknesses that emerge when a concept is deployed before an adequate inventory has been made of the wear and tear that history has impressed upon it. At the same time, Rehmann's study does not fail to acknowledge the strengths of the criticized theorists. A reviving Left can indeed make use of Nietzsche's insights into the dynamic of modernity, Rehmann, in agreement with Losurdo, concludes; but only on condition that it abandons ahistorical allegorical readings, carefully contextualizes Nietzsche's original pronouncements, and consciously considers the costs that accompany their contemporary appropriation.

The absence of an explicit confrontation with the readings of Deleuze, Foucault and Derrida by Losurdo himself may—despite his demurrals—be read by some as a failure to carry through to its logical conclusions an otherwise admirably conducted critique; or as a concession to Italian traditions of diplomatic understatement. Particularly so, since the immense popularity of these theorists in the academy and wider intellectual culture might reasonably have been taken as the motivation behind such a detailed critique of one of their fundamental points of reference. Yet the final sections of Losurdo's study suggest that this exhaustive analysis of Nietzsche's critique of modernity 'from the right' may have had a different point of departure. Losurdo argues that an accurate historical and political contextualization of Nietzsche's thought allows us to grasp elements which liberalism and modernity's self-representations would like to repress. In a certain sense, Nietzsche's radical-aristocratic critique figures as liberalism's guilty conscience, exaggerating and thus revealing the hypocrisy of an ideology professing notions of equality, liberty and rights at the same time as it

institutes new forms of oppression. Nietzsche's is thus a demystifying critique, which, despite its rejection of modernity, shares points of contact with those traditions which seek to demystify from the Left, including Marxism, and which have embraced the dynamic of modernity. Transposed into our own time, Losurdo suggests in conclusion, Nietzsche offers a critique *ante litteram* of 'humanitarian war' and the 'imperialism of human rights'. As he explained in a subsequent interview:

> Nietzsche highlights in a clear and pitiless way the weak points of the revolutionary project, and the democratic agitation for the 'rights of man'. The universalism which characterizes such a project and such agitation can easily assume an aggressive and imperial form, transforming into an instrument of domination.

In an Italy characterized by a renewed discourse of rights and the search for (neo) liberal elixirs, and in an Occident seemingly intent upon crushing the barbarian hordes in order to found a higher civilization, these are indeed 'untimely meditations'.