

BOOK REVIEW

NIETZSCHE IN HIS TIME: REVIEW OF NIETZSCHE, THE ARISTOCRATIC REBEL

Jacob Vangeest

BOOK UNDER REVIEW: Domenico Losurdo: *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel: Intellectual Biography and Critical Balance Sheet*. Translated by Gregor Benton. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2019; Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021. 1052 Pages.

The culmination of many years' worth of scholarship, Domenico Losurdo's recently translated *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel* is a behemoth undertaking. Initial impressions of this massive text attest to the care and rigor that went into conducting the historical analysis of Nietzsche. Situating Losurdo as an Italian Marxist is important, insofar as this work is a reconstruction of Nietzsche's project that centres Nietzsche's politics against the interpretations of other Italian scholars of Nietzsche such as Gianni Vattimo and including the Italian edition of Nietzsche's collective works edited by Mazzino Montinari and Giorgio Colli. Against those accounts, Losurdo wields what can be termed an extra-textual reading of Nietzsche that situates him as a reactionary thinker: taking up the various societies Nietzsche was involved in—accounting for this by way of letters and other historical artifacts—Losurdo situates Nietzsche's politics independent of his textual claims.

Losurdo's text contains 33 chapters which are organized into 7 parts. His early sections explore 'Nietzsche in His Time.' The first part, 'In Struggle against

Socratism and Judaism,' traces the early Nietzsche's positions on Judaism through his relationship with Richard and Cosima Wagner. Losurdo situates Nietzsche on a spectrum from Judeophobia (defined as a critical attitude towards Judaism but without civil influence) to Anti-Judaism (a hostility towards Jews on political grounds) to anti-Semitism. By placing Nietzsche somewhere between Judeophobia and Anti-Judaism, Losurdo distinguishes Nietzsche's anti-Jewish tendencies from outright anti-Semitism. These Judeophobic tendencies are traced through Nietzsche's critique of Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the early *Unfashionable Observations* with the term 'Socratic' coming to take the place of 'Jewish' as the foil of German authenticity: both having, for Losurdo's Nietzsche, ties to the weakness of enlightenment philosophy and politics. Throughout the text, Losurdo provides a Judeo-centric reading of Nietzsche's politics, with his Judeophobia playing a central role in the weakness Nietzsche sees in modernity.

The second part of the text, 'Four Successive Approaches to the Critique of Revolution,' explores the development of Nietzsche's politics in his middle or enlightenment period, starting with Nietzsche's turn away from an authentic German spirit in *Human, All Too Human*. This period follows the turn away from both Schopenhauer and Wagner. Rather than a clear break from the early period (as Nietzsche himself claims in *Ecce Homo*), Losurdo situates Nietzsche as being part of a 'reactionary modernism' that extends from his Judeophobia. Reactionary modernism—which can be read against the affirmative interpretation of Nietzsche given by Gilles Deleuze—is a term developed in Losurdo's earlier text *Heidegger and the Ideology of War* but is raised here as Nietzsche's realization that opposition to modernity's revolutionary movements could only occur from within modernity. Nietzsche is presented as professing an 'Anti-Revolutionary Enlightenment' that pushes for the 'colonial expansion' of the aristocracy against the liberal (and socialist) ideals of Enlightenment thinking.

These reactionary positions are presented as culminating in the period of 'Aristocratic Radicalism,' that is explored in the third part of the text, 'Theory and Practice of Aristocratical Radicalism.' Nietzsche's mature works in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* are used to situate this radicalism of Zarathustra. Losurdo supports his placement of Nietzsche as a reactionary thinker through Nietzsche's positions on slavery and hierarchy, his various letters

on the revolutionary movements in Europe, and his persistent critiques of socialism. This section also provides an attempt to square Nietzsche's apparent 'anti-anti-Semitism' with the stated Judeophobia (which Losurdo holds is present throughout Nietzsche's life). He does this by positioning anti-Semitism alongside Jewish-Christian socialism. Here, anti-Semitism is an extension of the weakness Nietzsche sees in Judaism and Christianity. It follows that the critique of anti-Semitism is part of a larger critique of weakness that is, itself, tied to Judaism.

The latter half of the text moves beyond the explicitly historical account to provide more in the way of a theoretical undertaking. The various chapters in the fourth part, 'Beyond Metaphor and Anticipation: Nietzsche in Comparative Perspective,' provide a comparative analysis of Nietzsche to various philosophical, political, and scientific perspectives. It is in the final three parts of the text, however, that the most important theoretical interventions are felt. Specifically, Losurdo is concerned with the way Nietzsche has been taken up in the work of scholars within Italian Marxism. He has two primary concerns: the first is the 'hermeneutics of innocence.' There are attempts to turn Nietzsche into an a-political figure whose work has been perverted by his sister, Elisabeth's, anti-Semitism. The fifth part of the text links Nietzsche to the emergence of the Third Reich, given what Losurdo claims as Nietzsche's reactive and Judeophobic tendencies. He takes issue with accounts that paint Elisabeth as the anti-Semite, suggesting that on a number of occasions, Elisabeth's edits actually attempt to make the work less anti-Semitic. For Losurdo, a primary issue is that in granting Nietzsche a position of innocence (and beyond that, allowing him to be a figure of emancipatory critique), these theorists fail to seriously engage with Nietzsche as a historical figure. At issue is that these 'hermeneutics of innocence' are arbitrarily applied: Losurdo wonders why Wagner is anachronistically treated as a Nazi while Nietzsche is assumed to be an innocent. This arbitrary application provides evidence of the paradox: if consistently applied, any and every figure would be seen as an innocent.

While the hermeneutics of innocence merely ignore or deny aspects of the historical Nietzsche, Losurdo's second concern is with the 'postmodern' (his term) reading he situates in the work of Gianni Vattimo and Michel Foucault (the former due to his presence in Italian scholarship, the latter given his prominent place in Western scholarship as a whole). Foucault can be read as a central foil in

the theoretical aspects of *Nietzsche*. Foucault promotes a textual reading where one strips authority from the author. This method can be read in direct opposition to Losurdo's extra-textual historical approach, which understands the author as central to the interpretation of a work. Foucault's position lends itself to his use of Nietzsche's genealogical method, which in turn provides no account of origin as Losurdo seeks in his historical Nietzsche. What is given in Foucault is an account of textuality and the emergence of textuality from the text. In his reading of Nietzsche (as well as the Derridean reading) what matters is not Nietzsche as historically located, but the Nietzschean text and what emerges from it. Like the 'hermeneuts of innocence,' Foucault strips Nietzsche of his historical situation, but without attempting to proclaim Nietzsche's innocence. Losurdo's charge against Foucault—and those others termed postmodern—is that it absconds too much of the historical lens in its focus on interpretation.

While acknowledging some legitimacy in Foucault's interpretive approach (insofar as Nietzsche's texts and notebooks provide a good deal of evidence for the interpretative approach), Losurdo sixth part claims that this position is a fundamentally incorrect reading of the German thinker. While acknowledging that Nietzsche is a thinker of interpretation, Losurdo suggests that this game of interpretations must be bound up within a particular field. For Losurdo—against the French interpretations in Foucault and Derrida—one cannot bring about an infinite number of interpretations to a text. Through his critique, he provides an account which paints the picture of Nietzsche as a proto-critic of postmodern interpretive models. Here, Nietzsche's consideration of strength is given as a central component: bad interpretations belong to the weak, good interpretations belong to the strong. For interpretations to be strong, they require a foundation in someone like Zarathustra or an overhuman. The unlimited interpretations generated in the textual, Foucauldian model, are read as a 'symptom of decadence' that must be overcome through a position of strength.

Against these tendencies towards innocence and interpretation, the final part of Losurdo's text expresses that the greatness of Nietzsche is to be found precisely in a position that the hermeneutics of innocence and the postmodern position shy away from: Nietzsche's reactionary radicalism. Given the centring of the political in Nietzsche by way of a 'Aristocratic rebel' or 'reactionary radicalism,' it may be fruitful to read *Nietzsche* alongside Bruce Detweiler's consideration of

‘aristocratic radicalism.’ The discussion in part seven, ‘Nietzsche and Us,’ explores the potential of Nietzsche’s reactionary project. For Losurdo, the appeal of Nietzsche is found in his metacritical view: the ability to question the questioners. Nothing should ever go unquestioned, particularly those who are in the position of dissent. Despite his ‘aristocratic radicalism,’ Nietzsche is presented by Losurdo as a staunch critic of dogmatism and stagnation. Nevertheless, the position is consistently tied to reactionary politics. Much of the text posits it as a reactionary turn against the developments in modernity that are realized in both liberalism and socialism: a Christian asceticism with moralist and socialist tinges. For Losurdo, both the hermeneutics of innocence and the textual, postmodern reading of Nietzsche undermine the strength of this metacritical potion by erasing too much of what makes Nietzsche, Nietzsche.

While the text is most strong in its historical accounts, these theoretical interventions might be the most significant parts of the text. They are, nevertheless, the weaker aspects. The strength of the historical analysis falls to the wayside when Losurdo engages with the overtly theoretical ramifications of his position. On a number of occasions, Losurdo takes great pains to position Nietzsche against what Nietzsche himself writes in his own publications. The most apparent example is Losurdo’s squaring of his claims which centralize Nietzsche’s Judeophobia with Nietzsche’s writings condemning anti-Semitism. In these circumstances, Losurdo displaces Nietzsche’s own writings in a sort of anti-hermeneutical gesture that emphasizes Nietzsche as an individual above his published writings. These gestures tend to be well founded—grounded in Nietzsche’s letters and notebooks—but do require Losurdo to pit Nietzsche against Nietzsche in a theoretical move that relays the impossibility of getting beyond the interpretive gesture in any historical or theoretical analysis. Despite his Marxist allegiances, these theoretical presuppositions in Losurdo’s readings may be best situated alongside the anti-hermeneutic and foundationalist approaches generated in the work of American scholars such as Brian Leiter and Maudemarie Clark. As such, Losurdo closes the door on the productive readings of Nietzsche found in the work of French thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze. This should, however, be seen as only a minor quibble in light of the historical scholarship. The overall arch of Losurdo’s text should be taken as a welcome addition to the English corpus of Nietzsche scholarship. Gregor Benton’s

translation provides a smooth and accessible read and Harrison Fluss' introduction situates Losurdo's text within the world of English-speaking Nietzsche studies. *Nietzsche* will be a useful resource for any scholar interested in a historical biography of the thinker.

jvangees@uwo.ca