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Nietzsche's Revolution: Decadence, Politics, and Sexuality

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INTRODUCTION

For the task of a *revaluation of all values* more capacities may have been needed than have ever dwelt together in a single individual—above all, even contrary capacities that had to be kept from disturbing, destroying one another.

Ecce Homo
“Why I am So Clever” §9

The price of fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition.

Twilight of the Idols
“Morality as Anti-Nature” §3

IT IS BY NOW A COMMONPLACE THAT Nietzsche’s philosophy is characterized by contradiction, a deceptively simple observation aptly summed up by the title of Wolfgang Müller-Lauter’s study, *Nietzsche: His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of his Philosophy*.¹ Müller-Lauter concisely indicates here both that Nietzsche is a philosopher of contradiction—a thinker who praises contradiction and welcomes adversity, opposition, and struggle—and yet also that Nietzsche’s thought is *plagued* by contradiction, inconsistency, and paradox. It is my contention that this dual set of conditions reveals not only Nietzsche’s most basic philosophical consistency (whatever this word can mean in the face of his attack upon it) but also his most important teaching.

Nietzsche’s readers are, as a whole, very concerned about his contradictions. Philosophers worry about Nietzsche’s famed problem of self-reference, often considered a foundational contradiction at the heart of his philosophy. How can this self-professed advocate of “perspectivism” claim that his own philosophical viewpoint is “true”? If every philosophical viewpoint is “only” a perspective, then is this also true of perspectivism itself? And, if so, then how can we take perspectivism seriously as a coherent epistemological theory? As John Richardson has asked, “What kind of truth can it be if it is (just) perspectival?”² Indeed, is Nietzsche even speaking intelligibly—can we even understand his words—if he makes no claim to any kind of truth whatsoever?

Thus far, Anglo-American philosophers have chosen one of two tactics in responding to the problem of self-reference in Nietzsche’s epistemology: attack and abandon, or revive and rescue. Practitioners of the first approach conclude that Nietzsche is hopelessly mired in self-contradiction, his critique of truth merely demonstrating the inescapability of truth claims. Practitioners of the second tactic attempt to rescue Nietzsche by





drawing a distinction, arguing either that he does not make truth claims at all,³ or that the truth claims he does make are of a different character than the truth he criticizes.⁴ A graceful and thorough response, the latter is no different from the former insofar as both answers depend on the presumed priority of the principle of noncontradiction. Because consistency is essential to philosophical rigor, concluding Nietzsche contradicts himself puts his very eminence as a philosopher into question,⁵ and suggests he is unworthy of scholarly attention.⁶

Political theorists are also concerned about Nietzsche's contradictions. While the epistemological problem does not escape their attention, political theorists are more concerned with Nietzsche's political loyalties, which are not simply unfashionable in their reckless elitism and juvenile adoration of brute strength, but also seem inconsistent with his philosophical critiques of essentialism, teleology, and sovereign subjectivity. Similarly, feminist theorists (those who bother with Nietzsche at all, that is) remain divided regarding the relative usefulness of Nietzsche's critiques of identity, objectivity, and truth for feminist ends, given not only Nietzsche's notorious critiques of gender equality, but also the multiple bilious remarks he reserves for his various tirades against Woman, women, and the Eternal-Feminine.

While philosophers have come to one of two basic conclusions regarding the status of Nietzsche's self-referential paradox, political theorists have constructed a more elaborate series of defenses in their attempts to resolve the seeming contradictions between Nietzsche's philosophical arguments and his political positions. Some, of course, simply conclude the dispute is irresolvable, arguing that Nietzsche's politics and his philosophy are at irreconcilable odds (with the latter often emerging as far superior to the former).⁷ Others, primarily those on the Left, have attempted to save Nietzsche from disrepute by focusing less on what he said than on what can be *done* with what he said, appropriating Nietzsche's critiques of truth and championing of the *agon* for projects of (sometimes "radical") democracy.⁸ Similarly (although decisively different in both strategy and purpose), the philosophical project of deconstruction has both traced its roots to Nietzsche and used deconstructive techniques of interpretation to exonerate him of political wrongdoing. These thinkers, in effect, use Nietzsche's "philosophy" to overcome his "politics," often specifically to acquit him of the charge of misogyny.⁹ Finally, feminist theorists have used Nietzschean critiques of subjectivity, identity, and truth to develop a less normative, more open-ended feminist coalition,¹⁰ a more substantial feminist epistemology,¹¹ or to reign in worrisome strains of identity politics ascendant in feminist theory.¹² Now, the very suggestion that Nietzsche's philosophy must be "appropriated" (and not simply "followed") for progressive political projects clearly suggests it is not immediately amenable to such usage. Many political theorists have insisted on precisely





this—that Nietzsche’s explicit political claims trump all. Citing his adoration of aristocracy and slavery and stressing his signature contempt for the “herd” of humanity, these commentators deny that Nietzsche’s thought could be legitimately used to bolster any liberatory project whatsoever, much less offer a framework for radical democracy.¹³ Similarly, some feminists reject Nietzsche as useless or irrelevant to feminism, yet another mouthpiece for the misogyny of the Western philosophical tradition.¹⁴

Each of these intellectual disputes actually represents an advance. After all, it is only within the past fifty years or so that Nietzsche has been admitted into consideration by the English-speaking world as a legitimate philosopher in his own right; Nietzsche’s accepted status as a *political* philosopher is even more recent.¹⁵ But what is remarkable is the surprising way in which the opposing sides of these disputes overlap: all too often the literature on Nietzsche associates his truth-pronouncements with conservative politics, while his descriptions of interpretation, perspectivism, and subjectivity become linked to an incipient leftism. Because Nietzsche’s declarations regarding, for example, the necessity of slavery¹⁶ or the desirability of aristocracy¹⁷ are spoken in declarative and seemingly unequivocal language, it is suggested that overlooking them is foolishly to appropriate Nietzsche’s philosophy for a politics it cannot coherently sustain. By contrast, commentators on the Left stress Nietzsche’s critique of the very notion of truth, suggesting that if this critique is applied to Nietzsche’s own assertions, then all of his inegalitarian views become subject to the same delegitimizing critique he applies to the entire Western tradition. Yet this surprising alignment is lamentable: Nietzsche’s truth-telling is not “simply” conservative any more than it is “simply” political, just as his critique or deconstruction of truth is neither “simply” progressive any more than it is “simply” philosophical. Indeed, Nietzsche’s assertions of truth, especially as regards life, the body, and will to power, are quite radical. Later, I will argue that these assertions are the foundational planks of Nietzsche’s revolutionary program to transform the modern age, a project so complex in its rhetorical and political strategies that one would be hard-pressed to deny its “philosophical” credentials. Similarly, Nietzsche’s critiques of truth are in no way necessarily progressive. As Wendy Brown has pointed out with specific reference to genealogy (although her point holds for deconstruction as well), there is no necessity that any particular textual practice entails any specific political allegiances.¹⁸ Indeed, as Nietzsche himself clearly demonstrates in the first essay of the *Genealogy*, one can certainly engage in genealogical inquiry without necessarily being committed to a progressive political agenda. Finally, of course, there is itself a politics to interpretive strategies. Methods of reading simply cannot be relegated to the “merely” or solely philosophical—they are in fact *entirely* political insofar as they govern the very parameters of intelligibility itself. After all, the protocols that govern one’s reading of





a text necessarily affect what one finds there. And what is more political than the struggle to determine who or what exists—to determine who or what counts as intelligible at all?¹⁹

However, all of this simply returns us to the epistemological question raised at the outset by the philosophers, marking it as perhaps the central problem in Nietzsche's thought, for the problem of Nietzsche's political loyalties is subsidiary to the question of the epistemological status of his views to begin with. After all, if there is no truth, then how can Nietzsche proclaim one, even if it is only his own? Political theorists have struggled with the question of whether to privilege Nietzsche's political assertions, which appear explicitly antidemocratic, racist, and misogynist, over his philosophical views, which some believe hold radical or liberatory potential. But for philosophers, the very possibility that Nietzsche's philosophical views could hold anything at all is in dispute, for they seem trapped in a maze of irresolvable epistemological contradiction. This question must be broached directly, since using Nietzsche's views on interpretation to undermine his political assessments merely presumes—perhaps illegitimately—that we can privilege Nietzsche's perspectivism over his politics, that we can count on his insistence on multiplicity and interpretation to trump his likewise insistence on an order of rank and dismissal of pity.

It is here, I think, that we find a more significant overlap in the way philosophers and political theorists have approached Nietzsche's texts: each set of readers has desired to resolve these difficulties into a single, more or less definitive account of Nietzsche's thought as a whole. The hope seems to be that we might finally settle the question of whether Nietzsche is, in the case of the problem of self-reference, mired in hopeless self-contradiction or cleverly surpassing the limits of language through his redeployment of the word "truth." In political theory, we believe we might finally settle the question of whether Nietzsche is "really" a radical democrat or an aristocrat, a feminist or a woman-hater. More significant than the substance of these disputes, in my view, is the anxiety they veil: Nietzsche's readers are troubled by the broader problem of *contradiction itself*. The difficulty is not precisely who Nietzsche is or what Nietzsche says, but what to do with argumentative assertions and political viewpoints, which, when attributed to the same author, are irreconcilable.

In *Nietzsche's Revolution*, I suggest that none of these paradoxes can be resolved once and for all. They cannot be resolved in their particularity because they cannot be resolved in Nietzsche's thought more generally because the very essence of that thought is contradiction. This means that both sets of scholars, in both disciplines, on both "sides" of these disputes, are right. They are right because Nietzsche's philosophy simply consists of two divergent sets of philosophical and political positions that cannot be resolved into a coherent reading wherein one side is definitively privileged over the other.²⁰ Nietzsche *is* both a proclaimer of truth as well as its





deconstructor, both a potential progressive and an aristocratic conservative, both a woman-hater and a (perhaps unwitting) feminist forebear. Indeed, I simply do not think that any textual evidence exists that could conclusively decide in favor of one side or the other in these disputes. And, really, is this surprising? If Nietzsche himself praises contradiction and multiplicity, if he rejects the possibility of resolution or unity or wholeness or any kind of Hegelian sublation of constitutive oppositions, should we really be surprised that his own thought is characterized by such irreconcilability? Shouldn't we rather be surprised at our own desire to make Nietzsche less complicated, less difficult, *less* paradoxical? What is at stake in showing that Nietzsche is "really" one thing or another? And can this demonstration be squared with Nietzsche's own dismissal of reconciliation, with the philosopher who declares even the best friendship to be an enmity?²¹

Of course, this assertion is itself a claim regarding who or what Nietzsche "really" is; such interpretive assertions are inescapable. But they are, perhaps, possible to undermine or dodge in order to undo them from the inside. This is in part what I am attempting to do by saying, in an eminently Nietzschean spirit, that the essence of Nietzsche's thought is contradiction. After all, if what Nietzsche "really" is is *contradictory* then this is simultaneously a truth that is also not a truth. As an essence, contradiction cannot capture Nietzsche's thought without undermining it(elf); it is a "that"ness that is also, and necessarily, a "*not-that*"ness. My aim, then, is not to resolve Nietzsche's thought into a coherent or unified whole, but rather to acknowledge and affirm its both/and status without domesticating or neutralizing either side of it.

In *Nietzsche's Revolution*, therefore, I intervene into each of the debates about Nietzsche's paradoxes—in philosophy, political theory, and feminism—but without maintaining the disciplinary divisions between them intact. This is because commentators in all three fields are similarly invested in finding a noncontradictory truth of Nietzsche's thought, but also because I think any such separation of field or domain would be an artificial one: in my view, Nietzsche's claims regarding politics and inequality are *essentially* bound up with his philosophical commitments regarding truth, an intersection he demonstrates specifically through the vehicle of gender throughout his writings, despite commentators' refusal to pay this intersection sufficient attention. This refusal stems in part from the view, widespread in U.S. academia and especially prominent in political science, that politics or the political is that domain of thought and praxis concerned primarily with the state, its machinations, and associated institutions. Political theory, then, as a "normative" undertaking, would concern the study of possible legitimizations of the state, perhaps also the state's origin and foundations (when these aren't presumed to be the same thing), and inquiry into the relative justness of the state's



institutional workings.²² While it is true that the state is a prominent locus of power, to presume that the study of power can be exhausted through study of the state alone is simply to beg the question by presuming the state as power's only domain, missing a more satisfying and robust delineation of the political as what is specifically concerned with *power per se* and the state only residually, only insofar as it is as an important site and redeployment of power.²³ Adherence to a state-centric model of politics and political theory actually prevents us from noticing the ways in which power circulates in multiple domains, saturates and informs relationships beyond those between sovereigns and subjects, and operates according to logics beyond the juridical. It is of course on this basis that much feminist theory has claimed gender to be a political relation, and Foucault has claimed mental illness, sexuality, and even truth itself as legitimate objects of political inquiry.²⁴ The political, then, might be better understood as that framework or point of view that renders politics apparent—the political is the perspective that sees social life as the very site or domain of the workings of power. It is on this basis that I would argue Nietzsche's philosophy is *essentially* political, for, as is well-known, Nietzsche claims much of our human life to be infused with power in a deeply constitutive way—from subjectivity to morality to knowledge itself, basic facets of our human life and being are in fact the effects of power or the by-products of domination.²⁵ In Foucaultian terms, we might say that Nietzsche understands power to be *productive* at least as much as it is prohibitive, and to operate in as multifarious and dispersed and uncircumscribable a manner as life itself. Viewed in this way, we can in fact see the ways in which Nietzsche's own philosophy of truth and power is the intellectual forebear of the Foucaultian view of philosophy as "the politics of truth"²⁶ or the history of succeeding regimes of "power-knowledge."²⁷ Delimiting political theory to the study of the state's legitimacy and justice, then, unnecessarily constricts its purview by overprivileging the state and rendering any other permutation of power irrelevant to political inquiry. By this measure, of course, Nietzsche is surely no political thinker; but, then, by this account, very little about human life is political and power is largely absent from the world. This is a view to which Nietzsche himself surely did not subscribe and that, if accurate, seems utterly to decimate the content of his philosophical thought, which, considered as centrally concerned with power as I take him to be, is in fact primarily, if not essentially, political.²⁸

Nietzsche's political views, then, and *especially* insofar as they involve women, gender, or sexuality, have been excluded from both philosophy's and political theory's consideration because they could not possibly, by definition, be relevant for understanding his philosophical project. In my view, this has impoverished our understanding not simply of Nietzsche's politics, but also of his philosophical views, insofar as they, too,



are suffused with gendered and bodily imagery, metaphor, and meaning. Indeed, we must seriously consider that if, as I have argued, the question of truth is the central stumbling block that seems continually to mire Nietzsche in contradiction, and truth is, as Nietzsche so often supposes, *a woman*, then how could severing his (gender) politics from his philosophy constitute anything but a radical dismemberment of his thought?

In Nietzsche's Revolution, then, I consider the philosophical and political contradictions disputed amongst Nietzsche's commentators within one framework, characterized as a single struggle that I see as the more comprehensive tension within Nietzsche's philosophy: the conflict between his revolutionary desire to radically overhaul the modern age and his nostalgic longing for a romanticized "golden era" in which everything—in particular, bodies and moralities—remained within its proper place. So, on the one hand, in his revolutionary posture, Nietzsche advocates nothing less than a complete overhaul of the entirety of Western civilization—what he calls its "form of life"—which he diagnoses as having been in decline ever since its ancient Greek beginnings, in the last throes of *décadence* now, and inching ever-slowly toward its nihilistic demise. Yet at the same time, Nietzsche consistently glorifies past ages and heroic figures, expressing contempt for the weakness, laziness, and effeminacy of his contemporaries who have lost all powerful instincts in their emasculated seekings after truth, equality, and virtue. Indeed, Nietzsche often laments the decay of older, traditional moralities, which he finds more honest, more noble, and just plain healthier for the human race. Nietzsche's frequent, often immoderate revelry in such nostalgia is proof positive that his revolutionary project was not one he himself could ultimately follow through with. Dismayed by the current condition of humanity, yet terrified of the forces his own revaluation might unleash, he frequently retreats into a longing for an order of rank that has decayed and is no longer operative, conflating health with masculinity and entreating modern man to "Become hard!" and give birth to himself in the only properly self-sufficient display of self-overcoming. In his most excessive moments, Nietzsche even explicitly longs for a redeemer to save humanity from its own decay (which he metaphorizes as castration), an *übermenschlich* figure whose creative activity will justify all the horror and misbegotten ugliness of humanity's failures, making them bearable from at least a cosmic or suprahistorical perspective. Nietzsche's embarrassing indulgence in a quintessentially Christian longing for redemption demonstrates both the aptness of his diagnosis of modernity and his incapacity to facilitate its revolutionary overthrow.

The real paradox in Nietzsche, then, is not that between his declarations and critique of truth or even that between his epistemology and his politics, but rather the contradiction between his deep, revolutionary longing for a total overcoming that he himself is unable to stomach, much





less bring about. For Nietzsche's reticence regarding revolution occurs precisely at the moment in which his diagnosis of modernity becomes gendered—it is only when *décadence* is characterized as castration that Nietzsche becomes truly unable to face this sickness, much less prescribe a therapeutic regimen or undertake its revolutionary overthrow. Nietzsche was thus unable to embrace the contradictions that he himself argues are constitutive of life, nor could he recommend the necessarily hybrid forms that must emerge from his revolutionary attempt to transform modernity. Frightened by the “unnatural” bodies his own revolution might make possible, he defensively calls for a return to a naturalized gender hierarchy to save a *décadent* modernity from nihilism and death. Nietzsche therefore largely refuses to take up the political challenge his own critique of truth invites, leaving it to others to take up his revolutionary project and carry out that which he could only authorize, but not himself undertake.

Importantly, Nietzsche's inability here is not emblematic of philosophical or political inconsistency, but rather can be seen as an illustration of the impossibility of purity, a performance of anti-idealism that is his larger teaching. Nietzsche's conflicting desires for both radical revolution and retrogressive return cut both ways: first, and perhaps most obviously, he is deeply critical of the Christian idealism and morality that have convulsed the modern age and are threatening its nihilistic demise. His demand that it be overthrown in a reevaluation of all hitherto existing values is quite clearly a position and program of revolution. Yet Nietzsche's honesty in relating his own inability to bring about—or even simply *accept*—the consequences of his own revolutionary demand also presents us with a deep critique of revolution, traditionally understood, as a definitive break with the old and the inauguration of the radically new. Indeed, Nietzsche makes painfully clear the ways in which revolutionary desire can *also* be a longing for purity. It can become an escapism into an idealism of the future, just as conservatism can become an escapism into the idealism of the past. Nietzsche's own failed revolution shows the tragedy of this impossible will to truth, the very sickness he is seeking to root out of the Western psyche. It is thus no accident that in attempting to destroy it, he performs for us its very destructive power. This is but one more proof of the need for total revolution, and one more performance of the impossibility that Nietzsche could bring it about.²⁹

After an introductory chapter detailing Nietzsche's understanding of some important terms for this study—the body, health, and will to power—in Chapters 2 and 3, I explore the affirmative or “progressive” side of this duality, detailing Nietzsche's withering diagnosis of modernity as suffering from *décadence*, and revealing what I believe to be the exciting and radical promise of his revitalizing, revolutionary rhetoric of will to power. In the second half of the book—Chapters 4 and 5—I explore the reactionary and conservative elements of Nietzsche's thought, which, in





my view, prevent him from redeeming the promise of this revolutionary rhetoric. Both of these views are interpreted through the prism of Nietzsche's view of the body, more often specifically through the vehicle of gender and sexuality (I consider the role of race in this framework explicitly in Chapters 2 and 4).

In the final chapter, I take up the question of where we go from here. If Nietzsche's thought and politics are characterized by this irreconcilable contradiction, what do we do? There are two questions at stake here: (1) how are we to understand Nietzsche? and (2) how are we to approach our own political world? This is where my own sympathies emerge most clearly. Casting my lot with the revolutionary Nietzsche explicitly, I attempt to develop the consequences of this line of his thinking to what I believe to be its twenty-first-century post-structuralist conclusions. Contradicting my own methodological proscriptions, I mine the Nietzschean corpus for reasons to privilege the revolutionary Nietzsche over the conservative one, uncovering evidence that he knew of the impending demise of gender coherence his own critique of truth authorizes and invites, and even endorsed (albeit tacitly) the arrival of this postmodern future. I then unabashedly appropriate Nietzsche for my own projects and attempt to theorize a revolutionary commitment that is harmonious with post-structuralist critique. This is a revolutionary politics sundered from recourse to either hypostasized origins or redemptive, teleological futures. It is my halting and nascent attempt to think through revolution post-Marx, indeed post-revolution itself, an attempt to realize the paradoxical possibility of a revolutionary desire that is, and remains, committed only to the *décadent* present. This is, I want to suggest, a Left Nietzschean project that Nietzsche would endorse had Nietzsche been a Left Nietzschean, an unlikely possibility that we nevertheless cannot conclusively rule out. Thus I actually have two agendas in this text—to argue that the essence of Nietzsche's thought is contradiction and to argue that Nietzsche himself authorizes contemporary queer politics. Now, this is likely a project Nietzsche himself would almost surely have rejected and even found contemptible. But it is certainly a project he *authorizes*, and I, for one, think that taking up Nietzsche's challenge is the necessary political task for revolutionaries and anyone else concerned about the post-Nietzschean, postrevolutionary world we live in. Nietzsche had no illusions about the difficulty of this task; indeed, he made all too clear that it was one he himself was unable to undertake. But in the wake of nihilism, there simply is no other choice. As I hope to show, in Nietzsche's view, our only options are revolution or death. I think he wanted us to choose the former.



A NOTE ON METHOD

In this book, I reference only Nietzsche's published writings, leaving *The Will to Power* and the rest of his notebooks aside.³⁰ There is, of course, a diversity of approaches and appeals to the *Nachlass* for interpretive justification. A standard compromise is to rely first and foremost on the published writings, appealing to the *Nachlass* only when it supports something already evident in the published works, or else can extricate the interpreter from a tight spot by filling in a gap that nevertheless seems consistent with assertions in the published writings.³¹ Others rely mostly on the published works, but refer to the notes for a conceptual clarity (regarding epistemological claims, for example, or important doctrines) believed to be absent from Nietzsche's finished texts.³² By contrast, Alexander Nehamas makes no distinction between Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings, arguing that as "an author, a public figure," all of Nietzsche's "writings are relevant to his interpretation."³³ And Heidegger, of course, relies *only* on the *Nachlass*, specifically only on the fragments collected in *The Will to Power*, which he believes contain Nietzsche's real philosophical views.³⁴ Pierre Klossowski's famous interpretation of eternal recurrence also relies virtually exclusively on citations culled from the *Nachlass*.³⁵

While I think Nehamas is right that "there can be no single answer to the question of priority,"³⁶ I nevertheless also agree with Clark that "the published writings provide much more of a context for specific passages,"³⁷ a context that the fragments in *The Will to Power*—and the other notebooks—obviously lack. This context is important not for the reason Clark suggests, because "many more checks on the accuracy of interpretation" are available, but rather because Nietzsche is a master stylist, a writer whose rhetoric belies any clear demarcation between form and content. I think it is necessary to take seriously the mode in which Nietzsche presents his philosophy and to read it as being equally as important as what he "says." Thus a collection of unfinished and unpolished writings, some of which were assembled into the "pastiche non-book"³⁸ *The Will to Power* by a manipulative sister and clumsy editors, and published under a title and within an organizational structure not explicitly sanctioned by Nietzsche, does not present itself as an obvious exemplar of Nietzschean philosophizing.³⁹ And, while compelling in its own right, the rest of the *Nachlass* only raises the same sorts of methodological questions for a reading of Nietzsche that emphasizes, as mine does, the crucial importance of his rhetorical presentation. It is because of these difficulties that I restrict myself solely to the consideration of Nietzsche's published writings for the interpretation offered here.