

Nietzsche: From Nazi Icon to Leftist Idol

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In October 1888, a few months before his mental collapse, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in his autobiography the famous line ‘I am not a man – I am dynamite’. He had been talking in this vein for some time, especially in letters, but in the last months of his sanity he became possessed by the idea that he was a ‘man of destiny’ who with his message of the Death of God would soon ‘break history into two halves’ and ‘change the calendar’. Between 1883 and 1885 he had put out his proclamation to the world, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, telling of a new utterly transformative anti-theistic religion. Nietzsche was convinced that *he himself*, meaning not just his teaching but his *person*, held the key to any positive prospects for the human race: thus he entitled his autobiography ‘Ecce Homo’, these being the words with which, in the Latin version of the Gospel of John, Pontius Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd: ‘Behold the Man!’

Already by the mid-1890’s there was a Nietzsche-cult in Germany, by the time of his death in 1900 he was world-famous, during the First World War the German military authorities issued a special army printing of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* for atheistic soldiers, while during and after the war many people in France, England, and the United States blamed Nietzsche for it. From the beginning Nietzsche was embraced from all positions on the ideological-political spectrum: anarchists, Social Darwinists, Protestant clergymen, theosophists, mystics, feminists, anti-feminists, nationalists, internationalists, anti-Semites and anti-anti-Semites. Artists, creative writers and musicians flocked to Nietzsche. Indeed the spirit of Nietzsche, or at least the way Nietzsche felt about himself, has never been more effectively communicated than in the opening of Richard Strauss’ 1896 tone-poem ‘Thus Spake Zarathustra’ – which became more widely known, usually without reference to Nietzsche, through the 1968 movie ‘2001 A Space Odyssey’.

It is well known that from the late 1920’s until the end of the Second World War the Nazis used Nietzsche as a kind of ideological figurehead. Hitler seems not to have read anything of him beyond scattered quotations, but was evidently convinced by ideological leaders of the party that Nietzsche’s persona, and various motifs in his writings such as the Superman, master morality and will to power, could be helpful to the movement. Hitler accorded high honour to Nietzsche: he gave financial assistance to the Nietzsche-Archive run by Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth, herself a supporter of the Nazis, visited the Archive three times, attended Elisabeth’s funeral in 1935 where a high-ranking Nazi Fritz Sauckel (hanged as a war criminal in 1946) gave the eulogy, had *Thus Spake Zarathustra* placed in the Tannenberg Memorial along with *Mein Kampf*, and had himself photographed gravely staring at a bust of Nietzsche. Many Nazis spoke of Nietzsche as the spiritual father of the Third Reich.

After the Second World War Nietzsche counted as a ‘fascist’ in all countries of the Soviet bloc and his works never became publicly available there. In the West it was a different story; there, after decades of suspicion Nietzsche was rehabilitated quickly. By the mid-1950’s he was widely seen as a liberal at heart, or at least as an existentialist. In his editorial for the first number of *Playboy* in 1953 Hugh Hefner mentions Nietzsche, alongside jazz and Picasso, as a subject his ideal male reader might discuss with a female friend over cocktails. For a time old-style Marxism in the

West kept Nietzsche in the background, but with the rise in the 1960's of the New Left, which by the late 70's had evolved into the 'cultural left', he took on a rather surprising image: earlier approaches to his thought were forgotten, so that he emerged as a pluralist anti-dogmatic thinker, an experimentalist who confounds fixed categories, an ironist, self-ironist and perspectivist, a prankster who, in Michel Foucault's words, makes 'our faces explode in laughter' at the thought of God, metaphysics, absolute truth and absolute morality.¹ This way of looking at Nietzsche developed first in France but soon took hold elsewhere, and by the 1980's had become institutionalized in universities throughout the West. Nietzsche came to be recognized as the godfather of poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, post-philosophy and liberating 'anti-philosophy', not as just one more philosopher but *the* philosopher of the new multicultural age, *the* guiding light for 'discourses of transgression' in many areas. Thus did Alan Bloom, in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*, speak of the 'Nietzscheanization of the left', while in 2012, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, in her *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon*, entitled her epilogue 'Nietzsche is Us'.

What can account for this transformation of Nietzsche from Nazi icon to leftist idol? The usual answer is that the Nazis misunderstood Nietzsche, or just distorted him for their own ideological purposes. Sometimes the question is avoided by saying that no 'real Nietzsche' exists, and that he *is* what one makes of him in ideological struggle.² I shall not enter into that idea, although it is *in effect* the methodological principle of contemporary left Nietzscheanism. As for the alleged misunderstanding or distortion of Nietzsche by the Nazis, surely this can be fairly judged by *reading* the works of Nietzsche, provided one approaches him without being intimidated by what he is *supposed* to mean. If one reads Nietzsche with an open mind, however, at least one's first impression is likely to be that the Nazi image of him is *not at all* a distortion or miscomprehension. From his earliest to the last writings, in published works and unpublished notebooks, Nietzsche upholds hierarchy over egalitarianism, condemns democracy and socialism, supports slavery, insists on the social subordination of women, gives his blessing to acts of bloodlust that release the inner beast of man, condones torture as a stimulant for those who do the torturing, condones cruelty in general as life-affirming, calls for eliminating the weak from society, calls for war as good in itself, pours scorn on compassion, and exalts in the strong man of power with a hard heart. For Nietzsche himself these are not secondary themes in his writings but are inseparable from his central message. He returns to these themes again and again with passion, declaring that on no account will he tolerate a softening of his thought. It is true that Nietzsche is *not anti-Semitic*, and is critical of the anti-Semitism within the Germany of his day, but he is not motivated in this attitude by humanitarian sentiments; on the contrary he views the anti-Semites themselves with contempt as belonging to 'the underprivileged'.³ By the same token Nietzsche criticizes German nationalism, but does so *from the right*: nationalism is for him petty politics, which he hopes to see supplanted by 'international racial unions' under the direction of an elite 'master-race' of Supermen.⁴

¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 385.

² Gilles Deleuze, 'Nomad Thought', 145.

³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* no. 864.

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* no. 960.

While these themes cannot be missed by any reader of Nietzsche, within today's leftist Nietzsche-commentary they are sidelined by the claim that they do not belong to his philosophy proper. This is a strange position, for it implies that Nietzsche, to whom so much credibility is given as a philosophical figurehead, had a very serious misunderstanding of his own thought. That aside, the issue remains as to *why* many cultural leftists are attracted to Nietzsche, and whether they are justified in distinguishing *their* Nietzscheanism from that of the Nazis. This issue goes beyond the individual Friedrich Nietzsche, for if Nietzsche really 'is us', the investigation of what makes people identify with him will reveal something about where philosophy stands today.

For Nietzsche the Death of God means that the 'absolute' values at the foundation of Western culture have been exposed as invalid, untenable, fraudulent and pernicious, and that, as a consequence, this system of culture is no longer sustainable. Previously, he indicates, only a few thinkers have understood this, but now, in the modern world, by the nineteenth century at any rate, a general consciousness has broken through that for two and a half thousand years Western man has been defining his world through errors and lies. On the other hand, according to Nietzsche, this consciousness is still a long way from achieving clarity about the *depth* of the crisis and the possibilities of resolving it. In particular there is a failure to grasp *how much* must be given up when one faces the fact that 'God' is a lie. People believe they can abandon theology and metaphysics while continuing to adhere to the *morality* which rests on theological and metaphysical foundations; they believe in a relatively painless transition to a godless culture through the values of egalitarian humanitarianism. But these values, Nietzsche insists, are discredited along with God; they cannot be saved by being secularized. Once God is denied, one and only one sphere of reality remains, which is physical nature: there is no other world, no higher world, no better world, but just *this* world, a world without 'moral facts'. What Western culture, rooted in the Judeo-Christian and Greek philosophical traditions, affirms as morality, is not validated but *refuted* by nature, for nature is pitiless, hierarchical and violent. The law of nature is the law of the stronger party. In nature the weak fall by the wayside or are disposed of without sentiment. In nature the strong dominate the weak. But people do not want to accept this, even while they acknowledge that God is dead. The moral system of more than two millennia has become part of people, such that they are not ready for the stark choices now facing them.

The bulk of Nietzsche's philosophical writings consists of extrapolations of these points. The prime target of his polemics is not Christianity or Greek philosophy *per se*, but what he views as the secularization of these in modern egalitarian morality. In fact Nietzsche, the son of a Protestant pastor, can respect the genuine Christian of today or yesterday, likewise the genuine Platonist, but he has nothing but contempt for the modern atheistic democrat or socialist, for such people, he believes, lack the courage of their stated convictions. In the Prologue to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* these are the people Nietzsche calls 'the last men', those who come *after* the Death of God but *before* the Supermen who will save and justify the human race: 'The earth has become small and on it there hops the last man who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea; the last man lives longest. "We have invented happiness", say the last men, and blink'.⁵ The 'last men' believe that *they* are the

⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Prologue no. 5.

future but Nietzsche is convinced that their godless world is doomed. As for the socialists who want to lead humanity into the future, Nietzsche says this in 1888: 'Whom among today's rabble do I hate the most? The socialist rabble, the Chandala apostles who undermine the worker's instinct, his pleasure, his feeling of contentment with his little state of being – who make him envious, who teach him revengefulness'.⁶

'Man always has God or an idol', said Martin Luther, and Nietzsche is of the same mind. In his view Christianity and metaphysics are rightly discredited, but a new god, a *godly god*, has not yet appeared.⁷ During this intermediate phase, so far lasting at least four hundred years, human beings have perforce turned to *idols*, but the age of the 'twilight of the idols' has now arrived, and he himself is toppling these idols, that of humanitarian egalitarianism above all else. This phase can be surpassed only by the arrival of a new religion, which is exactly what Nietzsche offers. 'I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth!' exhorts Nietzsche's prophet in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. And in the same passage: 'Let the Superman be the meaning of the earth!'⁸ This religion of 'the earth' has its own god, however, namely the Greek pagan god of wine *Dionysus*. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, his best-known work after *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and written as an 'explanation' of it, Nietzsche calls himself 'the last disciple of the god Dionysus'.⁹

The left Nietzscheans have not been very supportive of Nietzsche's Dionysus theme. It is not hard to see why, for it complicates the claim that God is dead, which is what they value most of all in Nietzsche; in particular Dionysianism looks like a type of *absolutism*. The Nazis too took their stand upon the Death of God, but they were not unreceptive to a new neo-pagan mystical religiosity; unlike the left Nietzscheans they did not fear dogmatism. Despite their differences, however, the Nazi Nietzscheans, the left Nietzscheans, and many Nietzscheans in between, share one key conviction for which they value Nietzsche as the superlatively eloquent standard-bearer. It is on account of *this* conviction that 'Nietzsche is us'. It is on account of the *consolidation* of this conviction, and its *diffusion*, that one can speak of the Nietzscheanization of culture. It is a conviction that has become so entrenched in Western intellectuality – by no means only on the left – that for the most part it is just *assumed* at the beginning of ethical and philosophical discussion: this conviction is *anti-universalism*.

The Nazis were anti-universalist primarily in two ways. Firstly in *respect of morality*: they did not accept a morality applicable to all human beings but distinguished higher and lower categories of humans possessing different degrees of moral worth, those at the top being the 'Aryans', those at the bottom being, among others, the Jews and the Slavs. Secondly the Nazis were anti-universalist *in rejecting reason* in favour of a racial mysticism that found its supreme expression in Adolf Hitler and whose values were to be fulfilled by mighty acts of will. These two dimensions of anti-universalism meant rejecting the two formative traditions of Western civilization, Christianity and Greek philosophy; they wanted to *wipe the slate clean and start again*. Nor was it only Western universalism that the Nazis rejected: the Eastern traditions, although in Europe of small practical relevance, were also condemned, for the same reasons. For

⁶ Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* no. 57.

⁷ Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, no. 47.

⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Prologue no. 3.

⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, no. 295.

the Nazis it was always a priority to repress any tendency of thought that challenged their *particularism*, that is to say their privileging of the ‘Aryan’ race. This meant holding down and discrediting *all* the universalist traditions; it meant being not just *non-universalist* but *anti-universalist*.

At first sight it might seem that left Nietzscheanism is not anti-universalist. For are not the Nietzscheans of today by and large defenders of human rights? Are they not, despite the political opinions of their idol, proponents of egalitarianism? If one runs through the names of leading Nietzschean leftists since the 1960’s – Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Gianni Vattimo, Alain Badiou, Richard Rorty – one must acknowledge that all these people have represented political causes that are not foreign to traditional left egalitarianism, in particular by insisting that no category of humans should be stigmatized and persecuted on account of their ‘difference’. Derrida, who perhaps can be regarded as their chief, said that he stood for a ‘radicalization of Marxism’, which suggests egalitarianism and possibly universalism.¹⁰ It is clear in any case that many people who *were* more or less old-style leftists, or even Marxists, have in the course of time found themselves in the camp of Nietzschean leftism, pursuing not so much the class struggle as multicultural identity-politics. It is significant, however, that the Nietzschean leftists rarely appeal to the concept of egalitarianism and seem not to like it; they seem to think it suggests a *standard of sameness* for all human beings that ignores ‘difference’. The byword of contemporary Nietzschean leftism, as of cultural leftism generally, is not ‘equality’ but ‘difference’. Vattimo, one of the foremost living Nietzschean leftists, a politico-academic celebrity who has served in the European Parliament as a member of the Party of Italian Communists, wrote a book *The Adventure of Difference*; for Vattimo, classical Western philosophy was a mendacious universalism through which the Greco-European elite sought to impose its own values on the whole world. Vattimo does not want *any* kind of universalism. He does not think ethics requires such an assumption.

Vattimo, like all other left Nietzscheans, but unlike the Nazi Nietzscheans who in this are more loyal to their master, rejects Nietzsche’s argument that an ethic of universal compassion can be justified only by assuming God. Or does he? And do the other left Nietzscheans? For the situation with these Nietzschean leftists is actually quite similar to that of old-style Marxists, including the mature Marx himself and then people like Lenin, Stalin and Mao: they are embarrassed about the moral foundation of their political practice, which, if it exists, would seemingly have to come from the despised ‘idealist’ metaphysical tradition denounced by Marx and his successors. In practice, what happens in all these movements of Marxist politics is that the question of ethics is left in convenient obscurity, except for when gestures of outrage, for instance about violations of ‘human rights’ and ‘humanity’, are politically expedient.

Orthodox Marxism, which regards itself as *scientific*, looks at ethics with contempt, as something Marx himself overcame after his early Hegelian period. The Nietzschean leftists are similar, for they take up their various causes, on the side, as they usually say, of the underdog, the disadvantaged, oppressed, marginalized and disenfranchised, without appealing to any ethical foundation: the rights they speak of do not appear to be *human* rights but to attach to the particular groups they represent, which is why

¹⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 92.

they emphasize ‘difference’ rather than ‘sameness’. Indeed Vattimo explicitly denies, in his book *A Farewell to Truth*, that what he calls ‘respect for the other’ depends on the idea that humans are ‘bearers of human reason equal in all men and women’; this, he says, is not ‘even remotely’ the situation, because it would presuppose ‘essentialist ethics’ or ‘metaphysics’. The real basis of this respect, he says – and I hesitate to quote the following words, but fairness demands it – is ‘acknowledgement of the finiteness that characterizes each of us and that excludes any definitive effacement of the opacity that everyone bears inside himself or herself.’ This, which he calls the ‘ethics of finiteness’, is Vattimo’s alternative to universalist morality. Or is it perhaps *his own particular brand of universalist morality*? But it cannot be this, for he goes on to say, in a very revealing admission, that ‘there are no positive reasons grounding this respect’.¹¹ Indeed this is the crux not just for Vattimo but for Nietzschean ‘ethics’ generally: if there is *no rational ground* for ethical decisions the motive for these must come from somewhere else, which can only be *emotion and impulse*.

Vattimo keeps returning to his point that there is no ‘ultimate foundation’ which can legitimize violence.¹² The comparison with the Nazis is apposite here, for neither did they, when they were killing the Jews or the Slavs or some other class of purportedly inferior humans, make appeal to an ‘ultimate foundation’ or ‘essentialist ethics’; a better way of putting it, however, would be to say that they did not proceed from *any* ethics but from a *particularist ideology*. The Nazis were *not ethical*, because they were anti-universalist. They acted on *decisions* that lacked any foundation other than the self-assertive will that defined Nazi ideology, a will asserted on behalf of a *particular* category of human beings. How then does Vattimo differ? The reality is that he does *not* differ, except in regard to the category of human beings for whom he asserts *his* will, and perhaps (but this is uncertain) in regard to the level of violence that he wills.¹³ This applies to *all* the Nietzschean and multi-cultural leftists, for there is no other alternative: either one exerts oneself on behalf of universal principles or one represents particular interests. Here it is also relevant to note that Vattimo sees his ‘ethics of finiteness’ as applying only in a future society (which Nietzsche himself stresses cannot exist) where domination and exploitation have been abolished. Until that situation comes to pass, he indicates, violence will be justified if ‘the essential motivation of the struggle for liberation is the effort to give a voice to those who didn’t have one before’.¹⁴

While Vattimo, with his ‘ethics of finiteness’, attempts the sophisticated conjuring trick of the emperor without clothes, not all Nietzschean or multi-cultural leftists are so bashful about their particularism. Chantal Mouffe, for instance, declares plainly that ‘to radicalize the idea of pluralism, to make it a vehicle for a deepening of the democratic revolution, we have to break with rationalism, individualism, and universalism’.¹⁵ So rationality should give way to self-assertive will, individualism should give way to collectivism, and universalism should give way to particularism.

¹¹ Vattimo, *Farewell to Truth*, 99-100.

¹² Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 100.

¹³ In a radio interview in July 2014 (reported in *Haaretz*, 23 July 2014) during the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, Vattimo said that he himself would like ‘to shoot those bastard Zionists’, that Israel was ‘worse than the Nazis’, that he wanted to see more deaths of Israeli civilians, and that he was planning a fund-raising campaign for Hamas so that they could acquire more lethal rockets. Vattimo is emphatic in not distinguishing his philosophical from his journalistic-political activity.

¹⁴ Vattimo, *Farewell to Truth*, 118-19.

¹⁵ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 7.

For Mouffe, politics beholden to universalistic ethics is simply *not politics*, which must involve an exertion of the will on behalf of some *particular collective identity* set over against another particular collective identity conceived as ‘the enemy’.¹⁶ But this is the formula of Nazi politics, and it is no accident that Mouffe supports her political ideas by reference to the so-called ‘decisionism’ of Carl Schmitt, who in the 1930’s was a prominent Nazi and took part in book-burnings. Schmitt’s popularity is on the rise today, almost wholly due to Mouffe and other left Nietzscheans.

In their effort to discredit classical Western philosophy the Nietzscheans – none more so than Vattimo – have turned to Martin Heidegger, whom they present as providing a kind of exposé of Plato and Aristotle: Heidegger, so they say, showed how from Plato onwards Western philosophy ‘privileged’ the thought that proceeds along a narrow logical track, denigrating and excluding poetical, mythical, subjective styles of thinking and experiencing. Now at precisely the time Heidegger was developing the ideas the left Nietzscheans value – under their own interpretation, as must be stressed – he was a member of the Nazi party. In 1933, as already the most famous academic philosopher in Germany, the highly ideological Nazi education authorities appointed him academic head (rector) of Freiburg University, in which capacity he delivered, in May of that year, his notorious ‘Rectoral Address’, entitled ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University’, to an assembly of academics and brown-shirted Nazis.¹⁷ One of his central points in this speech was that traditional academic freedom will no longer be the basis of the German university, because a new political viewpoint, and above all a new political *will*, is now in charge. Over the coming year Heidegger gave many speeches designed to rouse German students to a new militancy. In another address in Freiburg in November 1933 he declared: ‘Let not propositions and “ideas” be the rules of your being. The Führer alone is the present and future German reality and its law. Learn to know ever more deeply: that from now on every single thing demands decision, and every action responsibility. Heil Hitler!’¹⁸ Heidegger fell out with Nazi university authorities in 1934 and resigned his rectorship in that year, then withdrew from active political engagement. But he maintained his membership of the party until the end of the war, and after the war, although he lived until 1976, he never once tried to explain his support for the Nazis in 1933. Neither did he ever make an unequivocal condemnation of the barbarity of the Hitler regime, preferring to assert moral equivalences with the Western allies and the Soviets.

Heidegger appeals to the Nietzscheans because of his radicalism; like Nietzsche he condemns the entire history of Western philosophy, and along with it the history of Western culture right up to the present. The whole Nietzsche-Heidegger nexus is too complex to discuss here, although I will say that, in my view, Heidegger’s judgements on metaphysics are not sound, neither are Nietzsche’s, and neither are the judgements of the Nietzscheans either on Heidegger or on Nietzsche. Although these are simply assertions of mine, however, it should be obvious that questions about the foundations of Western philosophy are of great importance and difficulty, such that the impatient peremptory way they are dealt with by all the Nietzscheans, including Nietzsche himself, is very telling. For if one takes the Nietzscheans at their word, in particular

¹⁶ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 127-28.

¹⁷ Heidegger, ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University’, English translation in Richard Wolin (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy*, MIT Press, 1993.

¹⁸ ‘German Students’, a speech by Martin Heidegger on 3 November 1933 at Freiburg University, English translation in Richard Wolin (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy*.

their claim that reason is just a *ruse* serving the oppressors, it is no wonder that there is a dearth of critical discussion in Nietzschean intellectual culture, it is no wonder that slogans and rehearsed talking-points substitute for argument, and it is no wonder that so much authority is conferred on the intellectual masquerade and the procession of gurus who enact it.

When reason is scorned what carries the day, and is looked for within the movement, is *emotion*. This is a self-confirming world of *un*-thinking, for the very request for reasoned discussion meets an emotional reaction, on the assumption that the voice of oppression would be in command. But this is the most grotesque *misrepresentation* of reason in the history of Western culture. Plato and Aristotle did not close down and hold down the mind but opened it up, laying the foundations for *critical* thought and *critical* culture. The idea that Plato and Aristotle and the other Greek philosophers were dogmatic, and tried to enforce a fixed set of undiscussable truths – that this idea is repeated over and over again by Vattimo and other left Nietzscheans, and has gone into the text-books of university philosophy, *should* be a scandal. Are these people not aware, for example, that for about four centuries in the middle-ages the Arabs, at the height of their power, embraced Greek philosophy and then taught it to a West that was just groping its way out of the Dark Ages? The Arabs, a Semitic people who originally came out of the desert, and had no cultural kinship with the Greeks, thought there was something *universal* in Greek philosophy. But Vattimo and his kind know better, and as a result so do many thousands of students after just a few months of studies. The title of Vattimo's book *Farewell to Truth* sums up the situation: students are now expected to swallow, on pain of being branded in hideous ways, the idea that *truth is oppressive and ideology makes one free*. There is little resistance in the broader academy, for outside of Nietzscheanism in the narrower sense there reigns an anti-universalist complacency within which philosophy, having turned away from its 'authoritarian' and 'dogmatic' past, is merely an *entertaining exchange of opinions*.

For over forty years left Nietzscheans have been campaigning against universalism in what they conceive as a grand cultural war of liberation. It is a war encompassing all spheres of culture, high and low. Classical Western philosophy – which is excoriated as dogmatic, exclusionary, racist and sexist, among other things – is the prime target, but art and literature are also major theatres of operations. It is anti-Western of course, even though it is a product of Western thought, but the anti-Westernism is secondary to anti-universalism: the Western tradition is attacked because it is taken as the *bearer* of fraudulent universal values. That Western philosophy and culture *per se* is not the issue can be understood by comparing the similar spirit that reigned in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism were suppressed, precisely as universalist traditions that speak to the human being as such rather than to a 'class'. Another leading Nietzschean academic, Alain Badiou, formerly chairman of Philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, is a self-declared Maoist who has heaped praises on the Cultural Revolution. Badiou values Nietzsche as an 'anti-philosopher', who, he says, seeks to bring about a new historical epoch and accepts with joy that this can occur only through terrorism and violence.¹⁹ Indeed Badiou's political writings are replete with justifications for violence, including that of the Robespierre, Stalin and Mao, and he expresses contempt for people who fail to understand the 'necessity' for this kind of violence. As he puts it: 'Total emancipation

¹⁹ Badiou, 'Who is Nietzsche?', *Pli*, 2001, 1-6.

[...] is always situated beyond good and evil [...] Extreme violence is, therefore, the reciprocal correlative of extreme enthusiasm, since what is at stake is indeed, to talk like Nietzsche, the transvaluation of all values.²⁰ Badiou is not talking about violence in war, but the kind of violence perpetrated on the indigenous ‘class enemy’ at the mercy of revolutionary authorities; between them Stalin and Mao killed between more than fifty million people like this, in their ‘extreme enthusiasm’ for their cause. To be sure, Badiou’s cause of communism is the polar opposite to Nietzsche’s own political ideal, but how different is Badiou’s *spirit* to that of *Nazi Nietzscheanism*?²¹

Just as Hitler and Stalin and Mao effectively criminalized the universalist traditions, including classical philosophy, so do the left Nietzscheans. True, Nietzsche himself did something similar, but in reverse: while he saw the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition as serving the weak, the Nietzscheans of today see it as an instrument of domination. There is no better example than Vattimo, who defines metaphysics as ‘the violent imposition of an order that is declared objective and natural and therefore cannot be violated and is no longer an object of discussion’.²² In accordance with this conception Vattimo suggests that the Iraq war of U. S. President George W. Bush can be put down in part to the ‘dogmatism’ which the president and his chief advisors unknowingly absorbed from the classical tradition of philosophy.²³ He makes the same claim about Auschwitz: ‘The contempt metaphysics shows for the transient, the body, the individual in its specific and accidental singularity objectively prepares for the extermination of great masses of humans in the name of a theory.’²⁴ Vattimo’s view is shared by Lacoue-Labarthe, who declares that ‘in the Auschwitz apocalypse, it was nothing less than the West, in its essence, that revealed itself – and that continues to reveal itself’.²⁵ Indeed Lacoue-Labarthe, looking back behind the Greek philosophers, discovers an earlier dogmatism in the *monotheism* of the Jews, so that for him, however regrettable this turned out, the Jews in Auschwitz reaped what they had sown millennia earlier.²⁶ Auschwitz happened because Hitler was ‘dogmatic’ and

²⁰ Badiou, ‘One Divides Itself into Two’, in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Lenin Reloaded*, 13.

²¹ At least Badiou’s enthusiasm for mass killing has a political object. More strictly Nietzschean killing is *aesthetic* and as such self-justifying. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche speaks of the ‘pale criminal’ who, after committing a bloody murder, looks to explain himself by referring to robbery or some other motive; he *should* confess that ‘his soul wanted blood’ and ‘thirsted for the joy of the knife’. Nietzsche admits that society will want to and probably must punish such a criminal but makes clear that he has nothing against the act itself. The earlier-generation French Nietzschean Georges Bataille, writing before the Second World War, also took an aesthetic view of killing: under circumstances, Bataille contended, killing provides a *liberating joy*, for which reason he flirted with the idea of human sacrifice. Bataille was a Marxist or quasi-Marxist for most of his life, which did not stop him in the 1930’s praising Mussolini and Hitler as ‘sovereign’ leaders awesomely ‘other’ to the crowds they manipulated (‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, in Botting and Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader*, 128; for critical discussion see the chapter ‘Left Fascism: Georges Bataille and the German Ideology’, in Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*). Bataille believed in the redemptive-aesthetic function of violence in transgressing boundaries. While hostile to ‘normal’ violence, for example by regular soldiers or police, he felt differently about the deeds of fascist ‘militiamen’, which, he declared, receive a ‘characteristic affective tonality’ from the ‘religious value of the chief’ (‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, 139). Bataille’s reputation among Nietzscheans is greater now than ever before.

²² Vattimo, ‘A Prayer for Silence’, in Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 93.

²³ Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 2-5.

²⁴ Vattimo, ‘Metaphysics and Violence’, in Santiago Zabala (ed.): *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, 409.

²⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 35.

²⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 37.

‘arrogant’ after the fashion of the Western tradition, including of course Christianity, which makes one wonder how to view the Polish Catholic peasants who in 1942 hid Jews in their cellars at the risk of their lives, enacting a dogmatic ideology which, on the thinking of Lacoue-Labarthe, they shared with the Nazi death-squads.

Contemporary left Nietzscheans, like their Nazi counterparts of an earlier period, set themselves first and foremost against the universal. This is their cause. This is their ‘enthusiasm’. And it must be admitted that they have had success, for they have rampaged through the institutions of culture, particularly in education, creating a wasteland of prejudice and ignorance. They claim to teach ‘tolerance’, which seems to be the solitary virtue they recognize, but it is not true tolerance at all, for it is not *grounded* in anything, and cannot be, for this would be to submit to the universal. In a letter of 1886 Nietzsche makes this point himself. Speaking of the fundamental indifference of Catholicism to forms and dogmas he observes that ‘only an *ecclesia militans* finds intolerance necessary; deep calm and certainty of faith *allow* scepticism, and mildness towards what is different.’²⁷ The left Nietzschean party is surely an *ecclesia militans* and as such its ‘tolerance’ is belied by its fanaticism. At bottom the much-vaunted ‘tolerance’ of multi-cultural culture is pseudo-tolerance born of weakness: it is a ‘letting-be’ because fundamentally one has neither standards nor identity, because as a shell waiting to be filled with ‘something’, ‘anything’, one feels powerless to judge. But the general idea that not knowing is a higher kind of knowing, that the lack of standards is a higher standard, that to do without principles is the highest principle, that weakness is the greatest strength, and so forth – all this is grist for the mill of today’s multi-culturalist intellectuals.

Ratner-Rosenghagen’s ‘Nietzsche is Us’ is not a frivolous statement. The prominence of Nietzscheanism in the intellectual culture of the West over the past one hundred and twenty years is nothing that can be put down to fashion. Rather does it reflect the fact that, notwithstanding his errors, Nietzsche was right about so many things. He was right that belief in absolute truth and absolute values has lost its cultural force. He was right that the significance of this has not been grasped, for prior to him it was mainly traditionalists who had warned about the Death of God. He was right that the morality of humanitarianism has no foundation once theology and metaphysics are given up. He was right that the godless culture of ‘the last men’, who he concedes will ‘live the longest’, is not sustainable. He was right that modern secular culture, which tries to make a virtue out of weakness, must ultimately collapse from its own unbelief. About all these things Nietzsche was right. He was wrong, on the other hand, in his anti-universalism, and he was wrong in his solution to the Death of God. His idea of a tremendous act of will by the Superman, establishing an altogether new cultural dispensation, was a delusion; something like this was tried by Hitler, and in twelve years refuted. The left Nietzscheans have nothing better to offer however. Either they continue the communist dream, or they take a pluralist multicultural society as their ideal, failing to see that Nietzsche regarded this kind of culture, which already existed in his own time, as decadent, and as in the last resort *not a culture at all*.²⁸

²⁷ Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug 24 September 1886.

²⁸ See in particular Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditation II* on ‘The Use and Disadvantages of History for Life’ (1874), where he links cultural relativism with ‘the weak personality’: Western culture having ended, modern relativistic Europe has established ‘galleries’ of past and foreign cultures to observe and ‘appreciate’.

Socrates, who loved Athens, rarely left it, and served with honour in its military, is reported to have said 'I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the universe'.²⁹ The Nietzscheanism of today takes the opposite position. It rejects the universal on the grounds that some particular category of people may be disadvantaged by failing to measure up. So it has recourse to identity politics and what it calls the 'celebration of difference', a hollow phrase to cover the shame of the *defeated spirit*, for difference has no meaning except as set against a fundamental sameness. Those who find their *primary* identity in something less than the universal, in a *particularity* whether of the isolated self or some collective, live in *self-conceit*: they always want more of themselves and can never get enough of themselves. With this attitude not only do they damage themselves, they undermine the confidence in the universal which is the true foundation of civilized life.

I will finish with a touch of popular culture, by referring to an old movie I saw not long ago. For I often find that words of wisdom, or philosophical lessons, can crop up in unexpected places. The 1963 movie is *Charade*, starring Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. At the end of the story of murder and intrigue Hepburn asks the hero Grant, a government agent, 'Why do people lie?' He replies: 'Well it is usually because they *want* something, and the truth won't get it for them'. What is more honest and revealing: Grant's language or Gianni Vattimo's? And why do Vattimo and similar writers use the language that they do? Can it be that they *want* something, and plain-speaking will not get it for them?

²⁹ Plutarch, 'On Exile'.