
Review

Nietzsche's Great Politics

Hugo Drochon

Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016, 216pp., ISBN: 9780691166346

Contemporary Political Theory (2017) **16**, 566–569. doi:10.1057/s41296-017-0085-3; advance online publication 25 January 2017

Little consensus has emerged over how to interpret Nietzsche's political statements and, indeed, whether he has a coherent politics at all. While the dominant contention remains that Nietzsche is apolitical, an individualist concerned with self-overcoming and self-creation, there has been an increasingly lively debate between those who want to appropriate aspects of his thought to enrich democratic theory (Mark Warren, William Connolly, Lawrence Hatab, David Owen), and those who argue that he is best interpreted as offering an aristocratic challenge to democratic politics (Frederick Appel, Bruce Detwiler). In *Nietzsche's Great Politics*, Hugo Drochon argues that writers on both sides of this debate have increasingly divorced Nietzsche's political statements from their context, failing to adequately grasp the meaning of these statements by situating them in relation to contemporary democratic theory (p. 73). It is timely, therefore, to return to 'what politics meant for *him*' (p. 2). Drochon's overall claim is that having satisfactorily outlined his philosophy, Nietzsche was embarking on a 'complementary political phase', pursuing his own discernible political agenda of 'great politics' (p. 140). This account of great politics involved the creation of an international movement, composed of a master caste of 'ascending life', which would assume power across Europe and initiate a new age of high culture (pp. 161, 168).

Seldom has a book's success hinged more on a positive evaluation of its methodological assumptions; its reception will largely be determined by how convincing one finds the three claims that Drochon makes (p. 19), which I will address in turn. The first claim is that to 'correctly understand' Nietzsche's politics it must be placed within its own historical context (p. 19). Drochon succeeds in offering valuable insights into Nietzsche's political statements in the published texts by contextualising them, utilising letters, notes and historical sources to vividly depict his exasperation at the contemporary political situation, especially Bismark's version of great politics. In general, *Nietzsche's Great Politics* is most successful when it is on firmly historical ground. Drochon's commitment to recovering the context in which Nietzsche was writing leads him to refreshingly present his ideas without cherry-picking them to match democratic sensibilities or



overly moralising – this even extends to a brief discussion of eugenics (pp. 169–170).

The second claim is that Nietzsche's late notebooks are essential to understanding the substance of his political vision of great politics. These notebooks, some yet to be translated, 'comprise the innovative source material this book draws upon for its study' (p. 19). This book is sure to reignite the debate over the legitimate uses of unpublished texts and notes. This is a particularly contentious issue in Nietzsche scholarship, because of (a) the false heralding of the notes collected in *The Will to Power* as his *magnum opus* (p. 138), and, relatedly, (b) the Nazi misappropriation of Nietzsche, which relied on (mis)quoting this unpublished material. Nietzsche scholars since then have been obliged to justify how liberally they will draw upon his wealth of unpublished material. Drochon reiterates Bernard Williams' division of Nietzsche scholars into two factions: 'lumpers', who do not discriminate between published and unpublished texts, and 'splitters', who only refer to published works, or at least prioritise them (p. 8). Drochon sides with the splitters, which might seem odd in a book whose originality is derived substantially from analysing unpublished works. He justifies this by arguing that *specific* unpublished works are worthy of attention; many Nietzsche scholars, he argues, have 'thrown out the baby with the bathwater' by attributing the same status to all of the unpublished texts (p. 140).

For Drochon, the value of Nietzsche's final notebooks is that they shed light on his plans to intervene in politics (p. 148). In particular, he espouses a novel account of 'great politics', a concept that is partly descriptive and partly normative. Drochon's contextualising of this unpublished material is thorough and insightful (pp. 135–152), although his claim about its importance oscillates between a view that it gives us a *sense* of what Nietzsche was planning, and a view that it is 'central' to our understanding of Nietzsche's politics (p. 8). The gist of this unpublished material is as follows: the equalisation (levelling) of man in democratic conditions provides fertile ground for the emergence of a new higher caste that will exploit the surplus labour of these 'slaves' and justify their existence (pp. 92–93). Society will/should be divided into two separate spheres with their own 'modes of existence' (p. 97), with each ruling itself according to its own values – although there must be some mechanism for the masters to appropriate a portion of the slaves' resources. Nietzsche proposes the formation of a transnational 'party of life' or 'international movement' composed of 'ascending life' – 'Jewish bankers and military officers' are likely candidates (p. 168). This 'party' will battle 'the Christian party' for the control of Europe, aiming to carve out the separate sphere where overmen can be bred, free from the insidious influence of herd morality (p. 177).

Drochon argues that Nietzsche eventually decides on spiritual and intellectual means of persuasion rather than force, and thus his 'gentle' side wins out over his more 'bloodthirsty' tendencies (p. 176). It remains unclear, however, to what



extent this ambitious but vague programme of political reform can be considered a concrete politics, rather than the kind of fanciful speculation often found in Nietzsche's notes. Some of the sizeable gaps are padded with conjecture; on the subject of how this party might operate, for example, Drochon is forced to guess that Nietzsche might have envisaged either Wagner's view of the artistic legislator or the institutions authorised by the Manu Code (p. 178).

Finally, Drochon makes a third claim that extends the scope of his previous claims about the substance of Nietzsche's politics. He attempts to demonstrate continuity across Nietzsche's writings on politics (p. 19), arguing that we can therefore see his great politics as the culmination of a latent political agenda, rather than as a *novel* political turn in his thought. For Drochon, Nietzsche consistently asserts throughout his published works that higher culture can only exist when supported by the twin pillars of his politics: a caste society and slavery ('slavery' here is somewhat misleading: Drochon notes that Nietzsche considers anyone without two-thirds of his day to himself a slave (p. 93)). These two elements are essential because high culture requires surplus resources and *pathos of distance*. Much of Drochon's evidence for continuity hangs upon the claim that *pathos of distance* can only exist in a caste system, which, as he notes, is heavily contested in the literature, where many interpret it as viable within a democracy (pp. 95–96). Drochon also attempts to bolster his claim about Nietzsche's great politics by demonstrating its congruity with his philosophical concepts: the will to power, the eternal return and the overman. There are some good insights into Nietzsche's interpretations of Greek institutions and their management of the will to power of their citizens (again drawn from an unpublished essay, *Homer's Contest*) and a limited discussion of the eternal return and the overman, aiming to establish that these concepts have a necessarily political dimension, i.e. they require specific political institutions. Overall, this chapter feels somewhat cursory, given the ambitions of these claims and the sizeable body of literature that exists on these concepts.

We can therefore summarise Drochon's interpretation of Nietzsche's political commitments as follows: firstly, only a society split into two distinct spheres – master and slave – can produce the highest forms of culture. This is therefore the *essential* aspect of any politics worthy of being called Nietzschean. Secondly, Nietzsche assumes the role of the philosopher-legislator (p. 48), whose task is altering the direction of society, and begins to develop *contingent* political ideals and practices designed to realise this essential aspect of the ideal state. This distinction is not made particularly clear, even though it is crucial for establishing what normative force Drochon's reading of Nietzsche's politics has. Curiously, given the historically contingent nature of most of Nietzsche's political claims, he devotes his conclusion to considering what lessons these might have for the present, such as 'Nietzsche would have welcomed (Europe's) geopolitical unity ... (and been satisfied) to see petty politics finally giving way to a great politics of European



integration' (p. 183). Given that the central argument of the book is that (most of) Nietzsche's political claims can only be understood as responses to a specific historical situation, this feels rather tenuous; Drochon notes, for instance, that part of the reason Nietzsche favours European integration is because he perceives the need for a 'geographical counterweight to Russia and the British Empire' (p. 2). Presumably, Drochon wants to claim that once we have properly contextualised – and thus understood – Nietzsche's politics, it can legitimately possess normative force in certain conditions. But this is a complex claim, requiring more careful consideration. Leaving aside the contentious and ambiguous issue of the applicability of Nietzsche's contingent politics claims, Drochon more clearly argues that Nietzsche's essential claims – the necessity of a caste system and slavery – do impose restrictions on what a Nietzschean politics *must* look like. For instance, Drochon provocatively contends that his study revokes the Nietzschean credentials of those who have attempted to re-found democracy 'on a radicalized, postmodern, and *agonistic* basis', since they have failed to grasp that the agonistic struggle must occur *between* different spheres, rather than within one sphere (pp. 1, 100).

Ultimately, *Nietzsche's Great Politics* is a thought-provoking contribution to the debate over Nietzsche's politics, and even if one chooses to reject Drochon's stronger claims, it still contains plenty to interest the contemporary Nietzsche scholar, providing insight into Nietzsche's political statements and offering a tantalising glimpse into his preparations for a greater role in the politics of his age.

Simon Townsend
University of Exeter, Exeter EX44SB, UK
s.townsend@exeter.ac.uk