

NIETZSCHEANS OF THE RIGHT

By Daniel Miller & Michael Millerman — 5 months ago

Note from the Editors: The following written exchange is part of our *dialogues* series, which aims to bring together the best minds to analyze and debate controversial issues in depth.

Daniel Miller and Michael Millerman discuss the recent attacks on the online right and Nietzsche's role in contemporary politics

Daniel: We are seeing increasing attacks from [elements of the Christian Right](#) as well as [some parts of the Left](#) on terrible enemies whom they call ‘Nietzscheans’. You said recently that the most significant intellectual development in American politics over the last 7-8 years is “the reappropriation of Nietzsche by the Right and everything that goes along with that.” How do you understand these attacks, how would you characterize this reappropriation, and what do you believe is now implied?

Michael: Let’s start with what Allan Bloom wrote in *The Closing of the American Mind*, in his chapter on the Nietzscheanization of the Left. Bloom wrote that “Nietzsche’s colossal political failure is attested to by the facts that the Right, which was his only hope that his teaching would have its proper effect, has utterly disappeared, and he himself was tainted in its ugly last gasp, while today virtually every Nietzschean, as well as Heideggerian, is a leftist.” Several things about that passage are relevant. But you see immediately that something has changed in the roughly four decades since Bloom’s book was published. Today it is no longer true that virtually every Nietzschean is a leftist. There is now, as there was not then, a conspicuous Nietzschean Right in American politics. As Chris Waldburger [wrote in IM—1776](#): “The notion of a Nietzschean right-wing outside of conservatism should be fairly coherent for many. This, after all, is what figures like Bronze Age Pervert are inspiring and igniting online — a Right which is not ‘classically liberal’, nor Republican, nor rooted in the Enlightenment, but rather invested in mythology, beauty, health, and national greatness.” This new Nietzschean Right has given rise to a kind of moral panic — and in some other cases, to reasoned, thoughtful debate — on the side of centrist, liberal democrats, equally suspicious of the Left and the Right. Recall the debates in the *American Mind* over C. Bradley Thompson’s book *America’s Revolutionary Mind*, which included titles like “[The Rise and Fall of the Pajama Boy: Nietzscheans](#),” arguing that the political thought of these “two-bit imposters” is antithetical to Americanism and the principles of the American founding.

Christopher Rufo [recently documented](#) America’s (Leftist) Cultural Revolution, and his [call for a conservative counter-revolution](#) seems ultimately to have recourse to this same idea of America’s founding principles. What strikes me as new in this political milieu, however, is the threat that the counter-revolution now includes the energies of a kind of [right-wing anti-liberalism](#), and not only a right-liberal anti-leftism. As Mike Cernovich [has recently observed](#), “Right-wing energy is rising. What it will shape into is the most interesting and least discussed issue today.” Once you entertain the thesis of the Nietzscheanization of the Right, you start to see signs of it everywhere, and you’re better positioned to evaluate the debates, as well as the smear campaigns, concerning figures who might fall into that broad category. Of course, the opponents of the Nietzschean Right are not only leftists and liberals. There are also Christian thinkers and authors of other religious denominations who would prefer an alternative to liberalism on the Right that does not share in what they regard as Nietzsche’s hostility to organized, institutionalized religion. But that also tells you that this new phenomenon needs to be taken into account in all analyses, regardless of what perspective you’re looking from. Furthermore, there’s an additional layer of complexity, and that is implicit in Bloom’s statement. Bloom said then that “today virtually every Nietzschean, as well as Heideggerian, is a leftist.” We’ve established that there is some kind of reappropriation of Nietzsche on the Right. [But what about Heidegger?](#) “What about Heidegger?” here doesn’t mean that we are asking about two unrelated or arbitrarily connected topics. Heidegger, who according to every thoughtful opinion that matters [deserves to be taken seriously](#), was the decisive philosopher of our era, and Nietzsche is of greatest significance for him. Here is Leo Strauss’s judgment: “The profoundest interpreter and at the same time the profoundest critic of Nietzsche is Heidegger. He is Nietzsche’s profoundest interpreter because he is his profoundest critic.” What I would like to suggest, however abstract, pedantic, and unlikely it sounds, is that the Nietzscheanization of the Right makes possible in the American context an encounter between Nietzsche and Heidegger, which may deepen the nature of the conversation beyond the plane of scientific liberalism vs woke leftism. Even if the prospect of that encounter lies too far afield to be taken seriously, we can take a step back down to the more proximate realities on the ground and still be left with the new (again) Nietzsche factor. I say “again” because though he is now involved in “America’s cultural revolution,” he was also at issue in Germany, and therefore it may be worth revisiting the debates around revolution and counter-revolution in the interwar German context, too. That is why, for instance, I recently added [a course](#) on Arthur Moeller van den Bruck to my school, and why my introduction to Leo Strauss course begins with his work called *Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy*. It would be better for Americanism if it could shut the door on the German question, perhaps, but it cannot do so without risking a thoughtlessness that is incompatible with liberty.

Daniel: Let’s slow down a little. Bloom’s claim that right-wing Nietzscheanism was implicated in twentieth-century fascism, and indeed National Socialism, needs to be considered more carefully. The idea is very widespread, but it says more about our skewed understanding of history and our misunderstanding of causality than it does about Nietzsche. It is worth recalling that Nietzsche was already blamed for the First World War. According to H. L. Stewart, J.M Kennedy, and other largely forgotten, mainly British intellectuals, Nietzsche was among the causes of the derangement of the German mind which, according to the doctrine of ‘German war guilt’, was responsible for the conflict. In truth, there was never any serious basis for thinking that Germany was entirely, or even primarily, responsible for WWI, or that the German mind in 1914 was exceptionally deranged. The conflict was rather a deranged coproduction of all the Great Powers in a context of general derangement, or (it amounts to the same thing) a context of spiritual crisis.

This was the crisis that Nietzsche called *nihilism*. His critiques of Christian morality, pessimism, and romanticism, of liberalism and socialism and Wagner, and also his apocalyptic predictions, which turned out to be accurate of “wars, as there never have been wars on earth,” all follow from his diagnosis of intensifying crisis, across the whole of Western civilization. As Eric Voegelin observes, the notion that Nietzsche himself *created* this crisis by (incorrectly) describing it, is absurd. Any society in which it is possible for a single “mad” thinker to exert these kinds of effects must already be on the brink of destruction. Nietzsche himself makes this point in *Twilight of the Idols*.

The Nietzsche-as-villain theory itself is a symptom. If a society possessed sufficient resources to face the crisis there wouldn’t be a crisis. Because it does not, it seeks to evade it, through the fabrication of symbolic scapegoats designed to deny it, which only exacerbate it. The symbol of ‘German war guilt’ is a cardinal example. This symbol underwrote the catastrophic Treaty of Versailles, which helped generate Hitler, and the unimaginable chaos and violence of the Second World War. From this fact alone we can see that this symbol did not address the real problem. Nor did the Nuremberg Trials which followed WWII and initiated a new “Antifascist” doctrine which became hegemonic [and is today terroristic](#).

According to Antifascist ideology, as initially devised by Stalin in the 1920s, the roots of the crisis consisted in “reactionary” or “right-wing” elements linked with National Socialist and fascist self-presentation, including manifestations of nationalism, racism, chauvinism, conservatism and traditionalism. From the utopian perspective of the post-war Left, if these elements were eliminated the crisis would be resolved. It was the purely “artificial” or “imaginary” barriers imposed by history (as a history of oppression) which created violent conflict. One sees in this both a widening of the symbolic circle, and an immaterialization, echoing the history of antisemitism. We’ve moved from scapegoating Germany to scapegoating all human history as a remnant of an abject vector, present everywhere and nowhere, to be destroyed. It was at this point that the idea of a Left-Nietzscheanism entered the picture in the context of an effort to, essentially, rescue Nietzsche from the intellectual dragnet, and maybe also to recruit him into service for it. Walter Kaufmann is the man most responsible for Nietzsche’s post-war reception in English. Deleuze, Foucault, and Klossowski, drawing on previous work by Bataille, are the best-known French Nietzscheans. Kaufmann was a liberal humanist, while Deleuze and Foucault were existentialist anarchists. Like their 1930s predecessors, these men each created a Nietzsche in their own image and in accordance with the spirit of the times. Under the sign of desire, countersigned with the authority of Nietzsche, the reactionary and revolutionary components of being were polarized in the sixties, with the anarchist element coming to constitute an individualistic and hedonistic New Left. Nominally this remains the ideological status quo, but the social context has changed: In 1968 tradition still retained some cultural force in Western institutions and therefore was able to offer some dialectical tension. Today it has none, and the anarchist drive has turned on itself. Individualism itself, and also humanism, today are “Rightist” in the scope of a “crowned anarchy” committed to a total liquidation.

We should recognize that neither the anarchist Nietzsche nor the humanist Nietzsche were ever as distant from the “fascist Right” Nietzsche as they initially seemed. An anarchist element was always present in fascism, as Augusto Del Noce pointed out: it was one side of fascism, the other side being the traditionalist side. Fascism can also be viewed in the light of the “aggressive humanism” which is crystalizing in contemporary European “police artist” groups including Kirac in the Netherlands and the [Zentrum for Politische Schönheit](#) in Germany. Both groups receive regime funding to generate exploitation and violence. The broader context is a spectacular world of nervous overstimulation, and audiences thirsting for intensifying brutality. We are approaching a world in which torture will be celebrated as art. Nietzsche predicted this. But it is inconceivable that he would have welcomed it.

The drive to attribute reality to polarized ideological or philosophical causes itself represents a symptom of the crisis. The truth in all cases is a derangement of drives. The return of a right-wing Nietzsche or Nietzscheanism has to be viewed from this angle: the question concerns its real ability to respond to a situation [whose roots are much deeper than Left or Right](#). Two points I think are particularly important. One is to do with the rhetorical meaning of the “Rightness” of Nietzsche in an epoch in which “Right” has been made into a symbol in order to explain, and evade the reality of the problems we face. The symbol itself is an expression of nihilism. From the perspective of attempting to overcome nihilism, it may be that it is necessary to adopt and endorse the “abject” position *precisely because it is abject*. The historical analogs are with Sufi concepts of ‘Malamatiyya’, ritual violations of Sharia law by the Assassins, and the Sabbatian concept of Redemption through Sin. Evidently there is considerable scope here for extreme misunderstanding: prior application of this tactic in the twenties and sixties especially might have even helped to exacerbate our current dilemma. Still, I recall a statement by Dmitri Kaledin regarding Alexander Dugin: “His dream is to be executed for war crimes that he did not commit.” The second point is to do with the sense of “the Right” as a means of restraining, or restructuring the “war of the spirits” that Nietzsche predicted, by somehow reimposing order on the unraveling contemporary world. The wars of the 20th century were immense because essentially unbounded. As Houellebecq notes, the 21st Century has seen a further “extension de la domaine de la lutte” into relationships between the sexes. The problem would be essentially to return spiritual conflict to some specifically designated point in society. But it may well be that things are already too far gone.

Michael: The notion of Right Nietzscheanism, or of a Nietzscheanization of the Right, serves an important function. It reminds us of a crucial distinction at the heart of Nietzsche’s reception throughout history, one that is somehow more fundamental than those involving the issues of humanism and anarchism, which is not nihilistic. In the best case, it may help generate this insight: “What I thought was Nietzsche was only Nietzsche as he has been filtered or sanitized for me by people who depart from some fundamental aspects of his teaching.” The upshot of this is that first and foremost it suggests the possibility of turning directly to Nietzsche with a new sense of awe or at least curiosity about what he taught; the thinking is no longer done for us in advance. To read and think about Nietzsche is to suddenly be placed in the middle of serious disputes over the nature of human and political life. I said that the recovery of Nietzsche on the Right might one day lead to an encounter with Heidegger. But it forces us in the opposite direction, too: toward an encounter with Plato and Socrates (not to mention Aristotle and others). Through Nietzsche, in other words, we have access again to essential questions. The Right that wins Nietzsche back for itself has two roads to take. The first road is dogmatic Nietzscheanism. It invokes basic Nietzschean themes as principles of faith. It is more interested in operationalizing a set of answers or ideas than it is in raising questions. There are, for instance, passages in Nietzsche that stand as authoritative and rhetorically untouchable reference points for several contemporary phenomena. Take for example the following: “The will of the sick to appear superior in any way, their instinct for secret paths, which lead to tyranny over the healthy — where can it not be found, this will to power of precisely the weakest!” In particular, the sick woman: nobody can outdo her refinements in ruling, oppressing, tyrannizing.” The will to power of the weakest, the tyranny of the sick woman over the healthy... these were usable concepts not only during the Covid period but more generally. And of course, there are parallel positive passages about the strong, healthy man that provide a counter-model and standard. Dogmatic right-Nietzscheanism can in this way provide a stark contrast to left-liberalism and other contemporary perversions. Probably it will produce its own perversions. But through its standards of judgment it will guide action in a certain direction.

I am interested also in what may in this limited context be called philosophical right-Nietzscheanism, the other road. It is “right” for reasons already discussed. But why is it philosophical and not dogmatic? Because it sees Nietzsche in light of fundamental questions, for the full understanding of which it is equally necessary to think backward and forwards to Heidegger and Plato. In doing so, it stands a chance (nothing is guaranteed) of further deprogramming itself from the ingrained ideological codes of the contemporary West and discovering important truths about political life that may yet be called upon to instruct us in our time. That includes truths about the limits of what is politically possible. Take the case of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, which teaches us something about the limits of what can be hoped for when a new teaching wants to be promulgated among followers who are equal to it. Zarathustra is disappointed not only by the common men of the marketplace, who understand nothing, but even by his better disciplines and by the higher men. And yet we learn something from his failures and partial successes.

Not every political problem requires a philosophical solution. You do not need to have read Hegel or Marx or Kant or Plato to have some basic political common sense or to craft a good policy or law in some or another area, such as immigration or taxation. However, it is not inappropriate to say that law as such, as a comprehensive thing, aims at something about which we can think (only?) from the equally comprehensive perspective of philosophy. Consider my favorite example: Plato’s dialogue *The Lows* is a conversation between three old men from Athens, Sparta, and Crete about Law. The Athenian asks the Spartan and the Cretan to what end their legislator has legislated such things as common meals for men, and they reply that it is for the sake of victory in war. In other places, the laws are for the sake of something else. When we start to wonder what the laws are or could be for the sake of, we cannot always rely on basic common sense anymore. The Athenian shows the Spartan and Cretan that to legislate for the sake of victory in war, at least as they understand it, is to legislate with an eye to courage as the highest virtue. And yet, courage, for the Athenian, is not the highest virtue, and the lawgiver, especially if he was, as they believed, a god, would not err about that. The Athenian thus tactfully, delicately, and diplomatically reforms the understanding of the divine law through a correction that could be called philosophical. Whether or not courage is a higher virtue than justice, moderation, or prudence, not to mention a hundred other vital considerations from Plato’s work, is both in fact a significant political question (especially for legislators and teachers of legislators) and something that cannot be understood well without the benefit of comprehensive philosophical reflection. Thus, while not every political problem requires a philosophical solution, our understanding of the realm of the political as such, the realm of the legal, the “for-the-sake-of-which,” clearly has a philosophical dimension that comes to matter in practice, even if it operates behind the scenes of the more palpable political phenomena.

Why I think the Nietzscheanization of the Right is so significant in the American context is that it provides a breakthrough access point to this dimension of the problem in a way that Nietzsche without parallel. The mechanism of chance, seen from this perspective, runs as follows: return to Nietzsche gives rise, through both its dogmatic and philosophical versions, to the possibility of a new “for-the-sake-which,” which may then affect institutions, customs, and laws. There will always be something that escapes from the mechanism, so to speak, and every ritual violation and form of abjection can still have its place (there are atheists even in the religious city of Plato’s Lows, provided they do not publicize their atheism, etc.). Heidegger said that only a god can save us now. But he also suggested that only philosophy can prepare the space for the passing of a god. I add on the basis of lessons, learned above all from Leo Strauss, that the god who perhaps can still save us would not mind and might even prefer if we prepared the space for his coming through the study of not only philosophy but political philosophy. For that, the Nietzscheanization of the Right is just about indispensable.

Daniel: Your points are well taken. But I still remain skeptical with respect to the right-wing Nietzsche, or what a Right-Nietzschean political project would practically entail. Reading Nietzsche again recently, after almost twenty years, I was struck by the difference between how I remembered him and also the difference from the image of Nietzsche which tends to circulate in right-wing online circles. In *Twilight of the Idols*, for example, Nietzsche *denies* the very existence of the will: strange to read this from the thinker of the notorious *will to power*. Ultimately, Nietzsche’s almost infinite irony makes it very hard to extract a dogmatic position from him. He is constantly speaking through masks, articulating positions through masks, even setting up contests between various different masks. Nietzsche in fact explicitly affirms the need for masks. “All great things must wear terrifying and monstrous masks in order to inscribe themselves on the hearts of humanity,” he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Perhaps the right-wing Nietzsche would itself be a mask, if not two masks? What else could it be in the end?

It is curious that you cite Plato, of course, one of Nietzsche’s great enemies, or maybe great *frenemies*, in the same breath as you outline a Nietzschean Right. I ask myself, what would Nietzsche himself have made of this concept of a Nietzschean Right, or indeed, of Nietzscheans generally, let alone a figure like Heidegger with his portentous pronouncements, and his complete lack of irony? I cannot believe he would not have been utterly scathing. Heidegger, of course, wrote a book on Nietzsche — in two volumes. But Nietzsche would never have written a book about Heidegger. Nor do I think that Nietzsche would have enjoyed reading *Being and Time*. It seems to me that Nietzsche’s only real allegiance, if one can call it an allegiance, is to the realization of his life. Nietzsche’s style is truly extraordinary: this quicksilver, lethal intelligence, which dissolves every obstacle in its path. But to achieve it cost Nietzsche enormously. He spent most of his life wandering alone with his shadow, unknown and misunderstood until his final descent into madness, at which point his fame ascended meteorically. Nietzsche himself wrote: “There was one Christian and he died on the Cross.” This dictum also holds true for Nietzsche himself. We can only salute him, but perhaps what we need are not ‘Nietzscheans’, but men with the resolution and courage “to become who they are.”

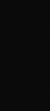
Michael: Resolution and courage are not enough for man to become what he is, if the question “Who is man?” has not been posed and thought through (to say nothing of the question, “What is being?”). We must resolve for and have the courage for philosophy. Do we need the authority of Nietzsche, Plato, and Heidegger to help us with that? I agree with Alexander Dugin, who argues that we do: “It seems to us that we ourselves think, but such an illusion arises only from ignorance or a poor education. We need only begin to work on ourselves for it to become clear that we constantly quote, and more often than not those sources whose existence we do not surmise. For precisely that reason, any person who wishes to think honestly will begin with a determination of the authorities and reference systems of thought in philosophy, science, art.” We are all under the influence. We become sober thinkers not by asserting our independence from authority but by rising to meet it in a genuinely thoughtful encounter.

You are, of course, right about Nietzsche’s masks. He once masked himself as Zarathustra, who was also often alone and who also had his shadow and his madness. Zarathustra possessed and wanted to propagate a teaching, a spirit. But he did not find worthy followers in the marketplace or anywhere else. (“They understand me not: I am not the mouth for these ears.”). When he did attract disciples, even the best of them fell short. Zarathustra therefore repeatedly ascended back to his mountain to be with his animals and, above all, his solitude. None of the “higher men” who later came up to his mountain met his expectations. And yet, Zarathustra did seek disciples, even if they were to be found only among “the future ones.” A philosopher like Nietzsche, and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, whose cup overfloweth and overfloweth becomes a legislator, a prophet, a destiny. There are thus two sides to the genuine philosopher. The One, as Heraclitus put it, which alone is wise, does not want, and yet does want, to be called by the name Zeus. The Nietzscheans we need will and won’t want to be called Nietzscheans.

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