ORDER

IQ

Isonomia Quarterly
Spring 2025

Nietzschean Reflections on Liberty

by Barry Stocker

Introduction

Nietzsche, though not possessing a consistently liberal set of political principles and though he did not write a treatise on political theory, had many things to say of interest to those concerned with individual liberty. He did write at length about morality, which is the declared central theme of three books: *Daybreak*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Where there is moral philosophy, there is always at the very least some implicit grounds for political philosophy, since political philosophy is typically conceived as morally grounded. In Nietzsche's case where the grounds might be characterised as immoralism, but it is still a form of ethical theory. Apart from this, there are also many aphorisms, passages and sections of his work which are concerned with political thought. They are frequently of value from a liberty oriented point of view or at least provoke thought around ideas of liberty. The most constant element of this is a general concern with the nature

and value of strong forms of individuality, a liberal interest.

There is a substantial body of literature on Nietzsche and political philosophy, some of which is concerned with evaluating him as a liberty oriented thinker. I have made a contribution to evaluating him as a political philosopher myself as co-editor of *Nietzsche as Political Philosopher*[60]and as a thinker of liberty in a chapter there on Nietzsche and Wilhelm von Humboldt[61]. Other examples of scholarship and commentary on Nietzsche as political philosopher can be found in *Nietzsche, Power and Politics*[62] Related work includes Dombowsky's *Nietzsche and Napoleon*[63],

[60]Knoll, Manuel and Barry Stocker (eds.) *Nietzsche as Political Philosopher*, Walter De Gruyter, 2014.
[61] Stocker, Barry, 'A Comparison of Friedrich Nietzsche and Wilhelm von Humboldt as Products of Classical Liberalism' in *Nietzsche as Political Philosopher* (see above): pp. 135-153.
[62] Siemens, Herman and Vasti Roodt (eds.), *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy for Political Thought*. Walter De Gruyter, 2008.
[63] Dombowsky, Don, *Nietzsche and Napoleon: The Dionysian Conspiracy*. University of Wales Press, 2014.

Drochon's *Nietzsche's Great Politics*[64], and Schotten's *Nietzsche's Revolution*[65]. Work on affinities and relations between Nietzsche and liberty oriented thinkers, include Hunt's 'Politics and Anti-Politics'[66], Romar's 'Noble Markets'[67], Kahan's 'Arnold, Nietzsche and the Aristocratic Vision'[68], Krulic's *Nietzsche Penseur de la hiérarchie*[69], and Mara and Dovi's 'Mill, Nietzsche, and the Identity of Postmodern Liberalism'[70]. The literature often shows difficulty in appreciating the

[64] Drochon, Hugh, *Nietzsche's Great Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2016.
[65] Schotten, C. Heike, *Nietzsche's Revolution: Décadence, Politics and Sexuality*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
[66] Hunt, Lester H. 'Politics and Anti-Politics: Nietzsche's View of the State', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (1985) 2/4: pp. 453-468.
[67] Romar, Edward J., 'Noble Markets: The Noble/Slave Ethics in Hayek's Free Market Capitalism', *Journal of Business Ethics* (2009): 85: pp. 57-66.
[68] Kahan, Alan S. 'Arnold, Nietzsche and the Aristocratic Vision', *History of Political Thought* (2021) 23/1: pp. 125-143.
[69] Krulic, Brigitte, *Nietzsche penseur de la hiérarchie: Pour une lecture << tocquevillienne >> de Nietzsche*. L'Harmattan, 2002.
[70] Mara, Garald M. and Suzanne L. Dovt, 'Mill, Nietzsche, and the Identity of Postmodern Liberalism', *The Journal of Politics* (1995) 57/1: pp. 1-23.

non-egalitarian 'aristocratic' origins of liberalism, along with the extent to which classical liberalism was constituted by anxieties about the consequences of mass culture and democratic despotism. This is accompanied by a tendency in some cases to take the most harsh anti-egalitarian remarks in Nietzsche in the most literal way.

Anyone who presumes that Nietzsche really advocates the Homeric warrior hero or the rather exaggerated view of the Code of Manu (the first known text defining a Hindu caste system) he refers to *Twilight of the Idols*: '"Improving" Humanity' 3[71], as models are really missing the point. It is not plausible to take the polemical contrast in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*[72] (which is subtitled 'A Polemic') between noble master morality and slavish morality of resentment into account, with regard for Nietzsche's aversion to the history of violent punishment of debtors and

[71] In: Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings*. Translated by Judith Norman. Edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
[72] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morality.* Translated by Carol Diethe. Edition by Keith Ansell-Pearson. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

criminals, along with self-torturing conscience in the second essay. There is certainly much to debate about where the combination leads us and Nietzsche left his texts open to a labyrinth of interpretations, but the answer cannot be that Nietzsche always and only supports the most extreme forms of hierarchy and cruelty.

The State and Laws

Nietzsche certainly has a strong reaction agains the increasing administrative state of the time, putting it in terms of the foreigners of the state. Like Kant and Humboldt before, he sensed that the state was becoming more and more of a machine which lacks the personalised and communal aspects of the earlier state. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*[73] he refers to the state as a New Idol in the section of that name in *Zarathustra Book I*. There the state is linked with death, claims to be a god, to be an originator of customs and laws, produces superfluous men and is opposed to the Overman, who exists by necessity.

[73] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Adrian Del Caro. Edited by Robert Pippin. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

The longest continuous discussion of the state is part 8 of *Human, All Too Human*[74], 'A Glance at the State', though as this is Nietzsche, it is digressive and broadranging in relation to the theme. One section worth considering for present purposes is §459 where he compares Roman law and German law. He thinks of Roman law as very logical and intricate, so detached from most people's customary sense of justice, while German law is more rooted in custom and tradition. Since German law lacks logical characteristics though, that is consistency, completeness, and interconnectedness, it cannot survive over time. The opposition has some significant echoes of Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws*[75]. In Nietzsche's view, it is inevitable that Roman law supersedes German law, which means the replacement of a customary respect for law with law as command.

There is a pessimistic view of history here in which we are bound to a state which becomes less and less

[74] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
[75] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*. Translated and edited by Anne M. Kohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

personalised, more and more commanding from a remote point of view. If Nietzsche is an extreme elitist he does not welcome the kind of increasing power of a bureaucratic-legalistic state elite. The ancient Roman state is taken as the model for this, which contrasts with the view taken in *On the Genealogy of Morality* II where the aristocratic Roman state appears to be the model of noble morality. These kinds of ambiguities cannot be taken as part of some ordered progress in Nietzsche's thinking, though inevitably some commentators have tried to do this. There is just too much ambiguity and modulation at every point in Nietzsche's life as a philosopher.

The ambiguity about Nietzsche's views of democratic equality and noble elitism continue in *Human, All Too Human* §439, where he suggests that the ranks of governed and ungoverned could be reversed in the state to release great new energies. This seems more like democratic radicalism and hierarchical obsession. This is not to say that Nietzsche was a democratic radical, but we can see hşm as someone concerned with opposing energies, the ambiguity of opposing energies and a restless urge to always disrupt so that hierarchies emerge which advance life, but themselves deserve to be

disrupted by life forces. Nietzsche opposition of Apollo and Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*[76] is, amongst other things, a distinction between state ordered hierarchy and an ecstatic overthrow of hierarchy in a democratic unleashing of energies. It can also be taken as the kind of recognition of the inherent conflict of values typical of liberal thought.

This extends to thoughts about nations and how the European nations should interact. One line of thought about the the nation is that it better seen in terms of culture than politics or the state, as can be seen for example in the Third Untimely Meditation 'Schopenhauer as Educator'[77] and *Twilight of the Idols*: 'What the Germans Lack' 4. This comes in part from his negative reaction to the German Empire created by Otto von Bismarck, with the Kingdom of Prussia at its core, through military victories and diplomatic triumph. Nietzsche initially welcomed this, but reacted against the resulting bureaucratic-military strength lacking in the

[76] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
[77] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Untimely Meditations*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Edited by Daniel Breazeale. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

spontaneity and creatively that Nietzsche sought in culture.This also involved a reaction against a particular kind of cultural nationalism, that of Richard Wagner with its German chauvinism, anti-semitism and Wagner's attempts at incorporating Christian themes into his operas, as explained in *Nietzsche contra Wagner.*[78]

A more general thought about politics was that liberal institutions tend to betray liberty, which would be because they are institutions, as Nietzsche suggests in *Twilight of the Idols*: 'Skirmishes of an Untimely Man' 38. This thought is expanded as a belief in freedom as struggle rather than enjoyment of achieved freedom, and as something that belongs to an aristocracy, such as the rulers of Rome and Venice. This must mean periods of republicanism without a strong monarchical figure, so at the very least we can see a Nietzschean defence of the sharing of against the monopolization of power by one individual. This arises in thoughts about late medieval and Renaissance Italian city states, thoughts which were in some degree inspired by the

[78] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Nietzsche contra Wagner* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. See footnote 12 above.

historian of the Italian Renaissance[79], Jacob Burckhardt (Ruehl '"An Uncanny Re-Awakening"')[80], who had an interpretation of ancient Greek culture as concerned with competition, which influence Nietzsche and many others, and is one of the reasons Burckhardt has been taken up in studies of nineteenth century liberalism, such as Kahan's *Aristocratic Liberalism*[81]. This was accompanied by the inspiration Nietzsche took from Machiavelli (*Twilight of the Idols*: 'What I owe to the Ancients' 2). Nietzsche was then sceptical about the long term possibilities of liberty in a city republic, but thought it could contain moments of heroic aristocratic active liberty.

[79] Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Translated by S.G.C. Middlemore. Edited by Peter Murray. Penguin, 1990.
[80] Ruehl, Martin, '"An Uncanny Re-Awakening": Nietzsche's Renascence of the Renaissance out of the Spirit of Jacob Burckhardt' in Manuel Diels (ed.) *Nietzsche on Time and History*, Walter de Gruyter, 2008: pp. 231-272.
[81] Kahan, Alan S. *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jakob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Stupor Mundi

Nietzsche shows admiration for pan-European political leaders like Napoleon or the 13th century German Emperor Friedrich II in *Beyond Good and Evil*[82] § 200. They are to be admired in as much as they create a kind of unity out of diversity, who was a great man of culture and science, known as Stupor Mundi (wonder of the world) as well as an enemy of the Pope. He was a distinctly cosmopolitan figure, who like other German Emperors held the title of Holy Roman Emperor and had lands outside Germany including Italy. Friedrich's court was in Palermo, Sicily. Nietzsche refers to him as the first European he admires in *Beyond Good and Evil* §300. He is like Alcibiades and Caesar, in a self-mastery that comes from inner struggle between very divergent forces. Alcibiades is one of the remarkable figures of Classical Athens, associated with great charm (on display in Plato's *Symposium*) and a reckless self-destructive character who had to leave Athens soon after his influence in politics reached a peak. Nietzsche

[82] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by Judith Norman. Edited by Rolf Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

admires both the republican aristocracy of Athens and of Rome, as we have seen, and the great destroyer of the Republic, Julius Caesar.

In the §4 of the part of *Ecce Homo*[83] on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche refers to a trip to Rome in which he wished he had visited the atheist anti-Rome, Aquila. This was a city founded by Friedrich II as an imperial centre to rival the home of the Papacy in Rome. Friedrich was excommunicated by the Pope for a long period that lasted up to his death, and was even referred to as a potential Antichrist, a figure of the apocalypse. Nietzsche's interest in Friedrich II then is not just as a cross continental figure, and even cross-Mediterranean figure (since he was King of Jerusalem, in practice not just as a title) of great cultural and intellectual consequence, but as an atheist and as an anti-christ from the Pope's point of view.

There may be a difference between the Hohenstaufen Emperor Friedrich II as a real historical figure and what Nietzsche sees in him, but

[83] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Ecce Homo* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings.* See footnote 12 above.

that does not take anything away from what we learn about Nietzsche as a political thinker. At least some of the time, Nietzsche's political ideas are modelled on a figure who unifies political and cultural life, who tries to create counter-empire to the Catholic Church and is an atheist regarded as an apocalyptic figure by the Catholic Pope. In *The Anti-Christ* §60[84], Nietzsche refers to Friedrich as someone who is for Islam (presumably because he ruled peacefully over Moors in Sicily and had a Moorish style court there, as well as negotiating his position as King of Jerusalem with the Al-Kamil, Sultan of Egypt) and against the Pope, as well as against Christianity in general. It was a choice for Islam, which Nietzsche sees as less slavish and more noble than Christianity, at least at this moment. Friedrich's choice of Islam rescues Germany from its Christian constraints.

Nietzsche likes to play on the period in which Islamic caliphates rivalled or exceeded Christian Europe in economic and cultural development. Here is an interest in playing on diversity and the idea that the outside feared culture might better represent

[84] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Anti-Christ* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. See footnote 12 above.

the highest cultural goals. The plan, in so far as there is one, is for a great ruler who unites all the grander aspects of various cultures in an exceptional self. Cultural and geographical differences are overcome by a figure who unifies Europe (strictly speaking part of it and some nearby land). The diversity in unity of unity in diversity is a defining characteristic of Nietzsche's overman, who also carries something of the apocalyptic, a moment of the ending of previous ethics and reasons in the creation of a new kind of humanity. This might be more metaphor than a program for the future, but this difference is never entirely clear in Nietzsche.

Napoleon shared Friedrich's pan-European ambitions extending outside Europe (Egypt and further east during his Egyptian campaign), the union of some kind of exceptional skill in politics with intellectual and cultural capacity, and the will to build an empire that challenged tradition. Napoleon was crowned in front of the Pope but notably not the Pope, and despite taking steps to reconcile post-Revolutionary France with the church, he essentially represented a counter to the transnational power of the church and the traditional crowns of Europe which drew legitimacy from claims to defend Christianity. Napoleon and

Friedrich II did not really have successors though some of their achievements outlived them, so that situation is the same for Emperors as for republicans, moments of genius and heroism as models of active individual liberty, interrupt the weight of gradual institution building and the rule of a depersonalized form of rule governed power.

Philosophical Empire

Nietzsche plays with an ancient model in looking obliquely at Plato's idea of turning the tyrant Dionysus II of Syracuse in Sicily into a philosopher king in *Daybreak*[85] §496. He suggest that this allows for a hypothetical history in which there would not have been something like the territorial Greek-Macedonian Empire created by Alexander the Great, but a kind of empire of ideas inspired by a Platonist Syracuse, in which Plato would have been the island Mohammed of the Greek world. That Friedrich II had his court in Sicily probably made this an even more attractive idea for Nietzsche. Maybe Plato plus Dionysus II could have

[85] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Edited by Maudmarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

been a power like that of the Hohenstaufen Emperor. The comparison with Mohammed is ambiguous since we could see this as a purely religious authority, but the expansion of Islam after Mohammed's death is a process of war and state formation. Something similar applies to the authority Friedrich II exercised from Palermo involved a lot of success in war and politics. These kinds of ambiguities are part of Nietzsche's writing.

Plato advocated small city states distanced from each other as a form of human community, but also admired the great imperial kingdom of Egypt. The most plausible way of interpreting Nietzsche's thinly sketched historical hypothesis is that of a kind of loose unification of the Greek world, containing many dispersed states round the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Adriatic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. This would be a counter to the role of Homer in unifying the Greek world culturally, which would seem at odds with Nietzsche's general benevolent attitude, Homer most strongly expressed in the posthumously published essay 'Homer's Contest'[86]. There

[86] Nietzsche, Friedrich. 'Homer's Contest' in *On The Genealogy of Morality*. See footnote 13 above.

Alexander the Great is said to have engaged in a nauseating parody of Homer's Achilles in his cruelty; Homer is said to have moderated the cruelty of the Greek world in forming the model for a spirit of context which provides limits to violence and revenge.

From *The Birth of Tragedy* onwards, Nietzsche generally gives a negative role to Plato, as the source of a culture which replaces both Homer and the tragedies as source. The play with a counter history in which Plato inspires a kind of utopian philosophical empire, which is more an archipelago of states than a centralised force of extraction and domination. The point here is perhaps partly to recognise the pacific element of Plato's philosophy, whatever we might think of his proposals for a pure ideal state in the *Republic*, or best possible state in the *Laws*. It also turns Plato against himself, insofar as Plato attacks marine empire in his parable of Atlantis in the *Critias*, itself reflecting Plato's dislike of Athenian democracy which was rooted in the political power of sailors in the Athenian navy, which was a supreme force because of Athens' success as a sea-trading nation, which led to a hegemony, semi-imperial power, over a number of other Greek states.

The possible interpretations and allusions are endless, endlessly overlapping and conflicting, as I hope to have shown in this passage, and that is typical of Nietzsche to write in this way. This does not relieve readers and commentators of the responsibility to seek consistent ways of reading Nietzsche, and then test them, but it does suggest caution in assuming anything in interpreting Nietzsche and the considerable dangers of quotation hunting in Nietzsche to prop up a one sided interpretation. It is inherently difficult not to get caught up in this to some degree, and clearly conclusions about systematic political thought in Nietzsche become hard to justify. The argument here is that his philosophy shows an openness which has something liberal about it; and his play with different political possibilities makes it impossible to read him as an advocate of a kind of limitless admirer of the cruelty and power of a biological or cultural elite. He is often horrified by violence and cruelty; and often exposes the hypocrisy of those who claim to have a pure morality without concern for power. This is not the same as advocating what the ‘good’ claim they oppose.

Friedrich III and Philosophical Liberalism

The thoughts above come out of reflections on Nietzsche's image of Friedrich II von Hohenstaufen. It seems appropriate to draw them to a conclusion with discussion of another imperial Friedrich, that is Friedrich III von Hohenzollern. His status as the third Friedrich must refer to Prussian kings, as there had only been a Friedrich III who was a German Emperor, but the Holy Roman Empire which disappeared in 1806 rather then the Kaiserreich formed in 1871, in which the Prussian king became German Emperor while keeping the kingly title. Friedrich III was then in title successor to Friedrich II, King of Prussia, often known as Frederick the Great. Still the coincidence of name with the Stupor Mundi is significant. Nietzsche makes it so when they are his favoured emperors. His admiration for the Hohenzollern Friedrich is clear in *Ecce Homo*, in §1 of the section on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Friedrich was the most liberal of the three emperors during the Kaiserreich, not itself a great test of his liberalism, but Friedrich really was very liberal compared with the aristocratic and military elites who dominated Germany, as well as Wilhelm I his father and Wilhelm II his son. His liberalism may have been

assisted by marriage to the English princess Victoria, daughter of the Queen of that name. His reign only lasted 99 days and he was not very strong in resisting the traditionalist hierarchical conservatives around him. Nevertheless, sympathies lay with the more liberal forces in Germany, liberal in the sense that the word mostly had in the nineteenth century, and he was a hero to Nietzsche, regardless of Nietzsche's tendency to be brutal in many remarks about liberals and the English.

On the above evidence, we can see Nietzsche as working to overcome the origin of the state as defined in *On the Genealogy of Morality* II.7, that is the conquest and subordination of a peaceful agricultural people by war like nomads. Given the variety of Nietzsche's way of explaining things, we can reduce this to the core claim that the state rests on exceptional violence in order to create a hierarchy. In the *Genealogy*, laws of the state rest on various kinds of tortuous revenge, sought not just by the slaves but the masters who become priests and violent shaping of the self. All of this is intertwined with the suffering that comes from restraints on human physiological and psychological drives, suffering which produces nihilism. The declared aim of Nietzsche in

Genealogy III at the end is to overcome the nihilism of the priests. The declared argument of *Genealogy* II is that the kind of humanity created by tortuous punishments and guilt has a promise bearing sovereignty, which allows for something new, though it may not itself represent the best state. *Genealogy* I looks at morality as originating in the power of the master and the powerless *ressentiment* of the slavish. It aims for something new. We should not mistake some of Nietzsche's more provocative remarks for an endorsement of master morality, though he certainly believes in slavish morality. We can then see much to inform philosophies of liberty.

Barry Stocker is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Boğaziçi University. Send him mail.