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Reconstructing Nietzsche as Progressive by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Nietzsche and Political Thought by Mark Warren. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988. \$25.00.

Contrary to the suggestion of a comprehensive project in the title, Mark Warren's new book is a narrowly focused inquiry. In the Introduction Warren announces his intention in an admirably clear and distinct fashion. Declaring that he presupposes "the validity of the various critiques of metaphysics of subjectivity that one finds in different ways in Marx, Freud, Heidegger, poststructuralism, and critical theory" (p. 6) Warren aims, not merely to interpret "Nietzsche in light of the problems of critical political thought" (p. 8), but show how Nietzsche's thought provides an invaluable "preface to critical, postmodern political theory" (p. 12). The formidable task Warren confronts himself with is to explain how, on the basis of Nietzsche's rejection of standards of justice, goodness, and nobility accessible to human reason or revealed by God, and contrary to Nietzsche's unrelenting denunciations of the rabble or multitude, his scathing depiction of the Christian slave, his mockery of natural and civil rights, his conception of the goal of culture and politics as the production of genius, and his unforgettable indictment of the last man, one can affirm a politics which favors egalitarianism, pluralism, and individual freedom.

Warren has sought to fashion an interpretation of Nietzsche at once dispassionate and partisan, one which remains faithful to what Warren calls Nietzsche's "fundamental problematic" while liberating what Warren regards to be its latent progressive political implications which Nietzsche evidently failed to grasp or unreasonably rejected. Warren is unusually sensitive to and forthright about the distinction between finding Nietzsche's meaning and correcting or improving Nietzsche's teaching. Indeed, in refreshing contrast to prevailing scholarly fashions, Warren in effect makes his reconstruction of Nietzsche stand or fall upon correctly identifying Nietzsche's central or fundamental intention.

Yet, Warren adopts a strategy for reading Nietzsche peculiarly at odds with his claims to fidelity. Warren rejects the principle that Nietzsche's thought can only, or even primarily or initially, "be appreciated by interpreting the movement and continuity of single texts" (p. xi). Thus, denying the integrity of Nietzsche's books and thereby rejecting Nietzsche's oft expressed conviction of the integrity of his books, Warren proceeds by announcing theses or views said to be held by Nietzsche; and then drawing textual support from all of Nietzsche's

writings including the Nachlass, Warren reconstructs and elaborates Nietzsche's "fundamental problematic" in the distinctive idiom of postmodern thought. There is, however, a deep tension between Warren's breathtaking disregard of the argumentative or dramatic context from which he plucks statements and his firm insistence, based on his interpretation of these decontextualized statements, of the inescapable historical and cultural situatedness of human practices and beliefs. Warren's methodology systematically violates the conclusion it is deployed to support.

In Chapter 1, his own sensible guidelines for using Nietzsche's notebooks notwithstanding (pp. xiii, xiv), Warren promptly turns to *The Will to Power* to support and elaborate his contention that Nietzsche's central problematic is the problem of nihilism. According to Warren, nihilism refers to "situations in which an individual's material and interpretive practices fail to provide grounds for a reflexive interpretation of agency" (p. 17). This paraphrase is characteristic of Warren's tendency to formulate a view, supposedly held by Nietzsche, in an abstract, technical language foreign to Nietzsche's exuberant, image-rich prose. One wonders whether something vital has not been lost in the translation. Moreover, one wonders whether Warren is reconstructing the appropriate text. For Zarathustra does not speak of nihilism; rather, he reveals that his gift to mankind is the knowledge of the death of God (Zarathustra, Prologue). And Nietzsche's parable, "The Madman," teaches that the only worthy human response to the unprecedented catastrophe for mankind, the death of God, is the godlike creation of sacred games and festivals of atonement (*Gay Science*, 125). Warren's reconstruction renders invisible the biblical or Christian language and categories on which Nietzsche relies not only to dramatize the monumental crisis confronting humanity, but to proclaim his vision of the exemplary response.

In Chapter 2 Warren argues that Nietzsche, like Hegel and Marx, held that human beings are social animals before they are individuals. Warren ascribes to Nietzsche the view that "Cultures precede and transcend individuals" (p. 51). Warren does not explain how one could reconcile that conclusion with Nietzsche's persistently asserted thesis that solitude is the climate in which genius flourishes. In his determination to establish the political relevance of culture for Nietzsche by showing the radical dependence of individual identity on culture, Warren somehow overlooks how Nietzsche, who praises philosophers such as Heraclitus, Plato, and Empedocles as "royal and magnificent hermits of the spirit" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 204) and Zarathustra, who declares that only where the state ends is the superman to be found and therefore admonishes his friends to flee into their solitude (Zarathustra, "On the New Idol" and "On the Flies in the Marketplace"), systematically link human excellence with emancipation from political society. The theme of the good life as the transpolitical life, perhaps the leading theme of Nietzsche's political philosophy, is scarcely touched upon by Warren.

At first glance, Warren's assertion that for Nietzsche knowledge in general, and science, religion, and morality in particular are cultural artifacts would seem to deprive Nietzsche of a standard with which to distinguish good from bad ideologies. Warren, however, believes

Nietzsche to have overcome this difficulty by means of the view that an ideology or idea may be judged true to the extent which it provides individuals with a “feeling of power,” or what Warren defines somewhat vaguely as “subjective identity.” Warren does not seem fazed in the least by the reduction of truth to power. Perhaps that is because he does not really take the notion seriously. Such, at least, is the impression he gives when, in commenting upon Nietzsche’s account of the Christian slave, Warren explains that the slave’s feeling of power is illusory, this despite the fact that even and especially on Nietzsche’s account the Christian achieves enormous political power --- because it lacks a basis in “actual will.” Warren, in fact, appeals to an external standard, however vague and ill-defined, to condemn the Christian’s subjective feeling of power as bad or inauthentic. If Nietzsche, as Warren approvingly argues, condemns “imaginary satisfactions” because they impair action, if false ideologies destroy “individuals’ ability to engage reality,” does not Warren, contrary to his intention, embrace a standard for judging of the goodness and nobility of human action rooted in a notion of true or poorer human satisfaction? Does not this standard significantly qualify the thesis of the social construction of knowledge which he ascribes to Nietzsche?

History, Warren explains in Chapter 3, is a crucial domain of the social formation of knowledge. Warren asserts that a central task for the critical postmodern reconstruction of Nietzsche is to explain how the “feeling of power” or “subjective identity” can be preserved while affirming that the individual is the product of a historical process entirely beyond his control. Warren rather brusquely dismisses Heidegger’s view that more fundamental for Nietzsche than the uses and disadvantages of history is the “will’s desires for revenge against time itself,” without apparently realizing that Heidegger is merely repeating Zarathustra’s anguished lament over his “most secret melancholy” in the speech “On Redemption.” Anxious to deny that Nietzsche’s thought incurs metaphysical commitments, Warren reassures the reader that “for Nietzsche, humans do not resist time as such, but rather the feeling of being unfree, of being determined by mere historical circumstance, of living a life that is not self-determined” (p. 81). Of course Warren’s reassurance entirely begs the question whether it is precisely the tyranny the past exercises over the present which produces the deepest feeling of unfreedom and proves the greatest obstacles to true self-determination.

According to Warren, Nietzsche’s genealogy, though “it does not claim universal truth for its results” (p. 102), is intended “to help individuals gain self-reflective knowledge regarding the conditions of historical agency” (p. 103). Since Warren asserts that Nietzsche subscribes both to doctrines of perspectivism and historical relativism (pp. 90-91), it would undoubtedly have been awkward for Warren to say that genealogy liberates because it brings to light the actual or true well springs of moral conduct. What is noteworthy, though unnoticed by Warren, is that Nietzsche says precisely this, proudly proclaiming the decisive achievement of his genealogy to be the writing of an “actual history of morality, what is documented, what can actually be confirmed and has existed, in short the entire long hieroglyphic record, so hard to decipher of the moral past of mankind” (On the Genealogy of Morals, Preface 7). It would

have been desirable, here as elsewhere, if Warren, where his reconstruction of Nietzsche deviates so dramatically from Nietzsche's explicit statements of his intention, to have discussed the discrepancy.

Introducing his account of the will to power in Chapter 4, Warren once again unceremoniously rejects the interpretation he associates with Heidegger, in this case that the will to power is primarily understood by Nietzsche as a subjective source of creative power. In contrast, Warren wishes to understand Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power, "as a critical ontology of practice," that is as an account of the conditions for the possibility of understanding and acting in the world. For reasons which are not entirely clear Warren believes that understanding the will to power as a form of desiring is tainted by metaphysical thinking while conceiving of the will to power as essentially referring to the intelligible character of the world is free of metaphysical commitments. However one wishes to characterize Warren's disagreement with Heidegger, it is pertinent to observe that Zarathustra, in such critical speeches as "On the Thousand and one Goals" and "On Self-Overcoming" sides emphatically with Heidegger and against Warren.

It is crucial to Warren's intention to present Nietzsche as a philosophic source of inspiration for progressive politics to maintain that the language of mastery or commanding, which figure so prominently in Nietzsche's account of the will to power, is a reflection of contingent political prejudices unrelated to Nietzsche's central doctrines. Warren is correct to argue that the will to power, insofar as it finds expression in political domination, is from Nietzsche's point of view defective. But Warren misunderstands the root of the defect. It is not Nietzsche's low opinion of mastery and commanding, but to the contrary, his exalted understanding of "the masterly task and masterfulness of philosophy" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 204) which compels him to regard rule over others, whether in the interest of the people's welfare and happiness or the ruler's own recognition and glory, as an unworthy form of mastery. Behind Nietzsche's ambivalence toward the desire for political power lies, at the heart of his thought, an almost boundless contempt for political life, the reverse side of Nietzsche's teaching that the philosophical or creative life is essentially solitary and the philosopher or creator is the hermit par excellence.

In Chapter 5 Warren seeks to understand Nietzsche's manifesto, the "revaluation of all values," as signifying a concern with cultural renewal, a recognition of the individual's dependence on political society and therewith a general concern for the political whole. This interpretation is made possible by systematically ignoring Nietzsche's extreme praise of solitude. Perhaps the most telling fact in this regard is that in the brief Preface to *The Antichrist*, the first volume of the projected four-volume work to be entitled *Revaluation of all Values*, Nietzsche identifies his intended reader as one belonging to the very few, skilled at living on mountains, possessing experience of "seven solitudes," and "above mankind in strength, in loftiness of soul --- in contempt" (*Antichrist*, Preface). The phrase which Warren imagines captures Nietzsche's dedication to cultural renewal stands, according to Nietzsche, for the rare individual's radical turning away from politics.

Warren argues, without qualification, that the epitome of Nietzsche's revaluation of science, morality, nobility, and the arts, is the "sovereign individual" (pp. 174,175). Curiously, in elaborating Nietzsche's image of highest human type, Warren ignores both Zarathustra's teaching concerning the Superman and the way of the creator, and Nietzsche's abundant remarks in *Beyond Good and Evil* presenting the philosophical life as the most praiseworthy form of life. Instead Warren draws on the first three sections of the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, a surprising choice since in that discussion Nietzsche is concerned neither with cultural renewal nor with the supreme type but with the historical process and its finest product, an animal with the "right to make promises." Furthermore, reading beyond the first few paragraphs one discovers that the "sovereign individual" represents, according to Nietzsche, the hitherto reigning ideal which, Nietzsche declares, must be overcome through the efforts of the "redeeming man of great love and contempt" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 2.24) Indeed, Nietzsche concludes the essay in which Warren finds Nietzsche's highest type with the assertion that he has not even touched upon the decisive issue --- the supreme human being --- which only Zarathustra has a right to address (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 2.25).

The far-reaching differences between the Nietzschean original and Warren's critical reconstruction aside, Warren, in the final chapters of his book, reflects insufficiently on the political implications of his own ideal, a society composed of sovereign individuals. It is one thing to declare the people sovereign, quite another to declare each individual sovereign in his or her own right. Warren is silent about the principles of organization informing a society of sovereigns or how the exercise of sovereignty by each is to be limited by law so as to avoid the outbreak of serious and bloody conflict.

Warren argues in the final chapter that it is possible to disentangle Nietzsche's philosophy from Nietzsche's brutal pronouncements on the nature and purpose of political life. Warren concludes that Nietzsche's central and deepest thoughts, contrary to the conviction which Nietzsche expressed with unsurpassed vehemence, justify a politics of "progressive rationalism" combining individual creativity, social care, pluralism, and egalitarianism. Warren's vision presupposes some defensible notion of human respect or the equal right of all to a minimum level of dignity in society. Yet if there are no moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 108) --- and I doubt that Warren would deny this proposition to be an aspect of Nietzsche's central thought --- it follows that notions of respect and rights are creations, and by no stretch of the imagination necessary creations, of the sovereign or truly sovereign individual. And are not some sovereigns beneficent monarchs while others ruthless tyrants?

Warren's selection of materials for his critical reconstruction of Nietzsche appears to be guided primarily by considerations of what accords with the political preferences he wishes to vindicate. Though Nietzsche declares his *Zarathustra* the most profound book the Germans possess, Warren ignores it. Though Warren acknowledges that *Beyond Good and Evil* contains the most comprehensive of Nietzsche's philosophical analyses" (p. xiv), Warren

refrains from engaging or even identifying these comprehensive analyses. Though Nietzsche writes eloquently, abundantly, and without irony about the soul, Warren knows only of the self, subjectivity, and agency.

Warren has brought considerable imagination, thought, and scholarship to his task of reconstructing Nietzsche in the image of critical postmodern thought. In revealing what must be forgotten, suppressed, or passed by in silence for the success of such a project, Warren renders the service of reminding us that partisanship is inherently uncritical or dogmatic. And despite the profound temptations to partisanship which Nietzsche himself exposed, what is needed according to Nietzsche's severe philosopher's conscience is not the partisan's courage of conviction, but rather the still rarer courage for an attack on one's convictions.