

Renato Cristi

Frank Cameron and Don Dombowsky
POLITICAL WRITINGS OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: AN EDITED ANTHOLOGY, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

On 24 September 1862, when Bismarck became Prime Minister of Prussia, Nietzsche was seventeen years old. Twenty six years later, on 3 January 1889, when he collapsed on the streets of Turin, Bismarck was still Germany's Iron Chancellor. Nietzsche's adult life coincided with the duration of that regime and was pre-eminently determined by the culture and politics of the Bismarckian era. Cameron and Dombowsky, the authors of this groundbreaking anthology, rightly observe that Nietzsche himself adopted a historical contextual point of view to define his own identity. He wrote: "I should not be possible without a counter-type of race, without Germans...without Bismarck, without 1848, without 'Wars of Liberation', without Kant, even without Luther" (p.1).

In the *Introduction*, the authors offer a well-rounded view of Nietzsche's cultural and political context, which includes a detailed account of the six major political parties active at the time, the political issues confronted by them, and their evolving response to those issues. The authors also seek to understand Nietzsche's situation within that political spectrum, and "where he stood with respect to the formative political events of the Bismarck era. These include, among others, the Franco-Prussian war, the *Kulturkampf*, the anti-Socialist laws, the 'Social Question' and anti-Semitism" (6).

The authors articulate a contextual argument in six brilliantly condensed sections which carefully annotate Nietzsche's reactions to his milieu. These sections serve to introduce and, for the first time, present a rich selection of Nietzsche's cultural and political writings in chronological succession. The first section, *Schulpforta*, 1862, highlights a rare essay written in January 1862 where Nietzsche defended Napoleon III's coup d'état of December 1851 and justified the exertion of charismatic authority. The authority claimed by individual agents would henceforth receive pride of place in his thought. He would later praise the Greeks for whom "the most abstract always goes back towards a person" as opposed to moderns for whom "the most personal sublimates into an abstraction".¹

Bismarck's expansionist annexation of Schleswig and Holstein in 1864, and later his victory over Austria in 1866, sparked Nietzsche's enthusiasm for the Chancellor and a somber acceptance of the realities of war. In a letter he wrote: "In the last fifty years we have never been so close to the fulfillment of our German hopes. I am beginning gradually to understand that there was probably no softer alternative to a horrific war of annihilation"(32). In this second section of the anthology, *Agonistic Politics, 1871-1874*, the texts selected show Nietzsche "championing Wagner's programme of cultural renewal" and, at the same time, manifesting his disappointment "over the [Franco-Prussian] war's consequences for culture"(33). In "The Greek State," Nietzsche "praises the Ancient Greek *polis* for its hierarchical structure and its capacity to generate cultural excellence through exploitation of slave labour" (34). And in "On the Future of our Educational Institutions", he denounces a democratically inspired state bent on expanding its control over culture.

Nietzsche's critique of the modern state owed much to Burckhardt. Together with other political historians, like Treitschke and Sybel (whose lectures Nietzsche attended at the University of Bonn), Burckhardt adhered to the agenda adopted by the right-wing of the National Liberal Party, the party of *Bildung und Besitz*, of secular culture and *laissez faire* economics. These were authoritarian liberals who opposed equal rights, constitutionalism, parliamentary government, and were open to the rule of personal authority; in other words, liberals who, in support of Bismarck's anti-socialist legislation and other exceptions to the rule of law, would "assume 'illiberal' forms" (22). Nietzsche's individualism and his view of a minimal non-productive state were, according to the authors, "liberal in tenor" (22). But, because of his proximity to those historians, the authors boldly characterize him as "a liberal engaged in an immanent critique of liberalism" (21).²

The third section, *The Free Spirit, 1878-1880*, records a change in Nietzsche's philosophical orientation. He now took distance from Wagner and began to write "as a rationalist promoting the ideals of the Enlightenment" (72). He supported Bismarck's 1878 enactment of the anti-socialist laws and called for "as little state as possible," which, in the view of the authors, underscored his "liberal register" (74 & 95). Accordingly, Nietzsche also praised the Italian Renaissance for its "liberation of thought, disdain for authorities, the triumph of education over the arrogance lineage" (73 & 81).

In 1881, due to the failure of his anti-socialist legislation to attain its objectives, Bismarck sought a compromise by introducing social welfare legislation. Nietzsche opposed these concessions and radicalized "his antipathy

towards the democratic vision of socialist equality” (116). In the fourth section, entitled *The Campaign against Morality, 1881-1885*, the authors highlight Nietzsche’s critique of the morality of selflessness, which demonstrates “how the Christian ‘doctrine of the sympathetic affections’ has insinuated itself into political life since ‘the time of the French Revolution’ and now constitutes the ‘common ground’ of ‘all socialistic principles’” (116-117 & 123). Nietzsche blamed the rise of socialism on the bourgeoisie’s failure to justify and wield their commanding authority. There would be no socialist workers in the world if, as he writes, “the superior class above them constantly shows itself legitimately superior and born to command” (117 & 143). Hence his praise for the authority exerted by charismatic individuals like Napoleon, who “reject universal norms and unconditional duties” (118), and his agreement with his early defense of Napoleon III’s rule of exception.

Aristocratic Radical, 1886-1887 corresponds to the fifth section of the book. After repudiating socialism, parliamentary government and universal suffrage, Nietzsche streamlined his radical aristocratic views defined by the recognition of rank orders, class differences, the pathos of distance and “the constant practice of obeying and commanding” (204). The theme of charismatic authority is again brought to the fore. “The new ruling caste Nietzsche proposes entails the appearance of a ‘new type of philosopher and commander’ [184]... motivated towards a different level of ‘psychical power’ [205], which accommodates itself to immoral (anti-Christian) actions” (172).

The last section, *The Antichrist, 1888*, focuses on Nietzsche’s reaction to the resurgence, after the proclamation of Wilhelm II, of the Christian state ideal and its attending anti-semitism. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche warned: “And let us not underestimate the fatal influence which crept out of Christianity into politics” (241 & 259). Reiterating his early critique of the *Kulturstaat*, he wrote: “culture and the state...are antagonists... all great periods of culture have been periods of political decline” (242 & 246). Culture constitutes a spontaneous order whose development ought not to be disturbed by a political state, particularly a democratic one. The authors rightly observe that when Nietzsche defined himself as “the last *anti-political* German” (270), he was expressing an anti-democratic stance (242).

This comprehensive and yet succinct historical argument, lucidly developed by Cameron and Dombowsky, serves as the contextual background needed to tackle one of the theoretical issues that has divided Nietzschean scholarship. The evidence presented shows that Nietzsche was essentially concerned about culture, particularly the decadent Christian culture that paralyzed the

closing days of Bismarck's regime. Was this a purely cultural concern, or was it also political? The dominant position in the Anglo-American tradition, which stems from the seminal work of Walter Kaufmann, views Nietzsche as a steadfast anti-political thinker whose orientation was essentially cultural. As the bearer of an aristocratic outlook and advocate for a new nobility, he put forward cultural, not political proposals. Nietzsche, the argument goes, was not committed to the establishment of an actual aristocratic regime; his ideal aristocrats were not "authoritarian, elitist and exploitative" political agents, intent, as he put it, "on setting masses in motion" (KSA13, 16 [39]).³ In contrast, our authors do not accept what they consider to be "the extreme view that Nietzsche's concern with culture was not also political" (1).

Nietzsche did neither recommend crude authoritarian domination nor was he interested in drawing up constitutional schemes or governmental programs. His reserved aristocratic stance depended on the cultivation of exceptionally high human specimens who would wield charismatic authority to overstep the claims of formal legal authority. The essay selected by the authors to introduce their anthology, where he "celebrates Napoleon III as a political genius, one who 'is governed by other and higher laws than the ordinary person' and whose genius can be recognized by his success" (24), illustrates the point. By underscoring its charismatic gist, Nietzsche traced the legitimacy of authority back to the will, to instinct. The authors rightly note that Nietzsche evoked Napoleon "as an exemplar...intended to capture his politics of the future" (173).

The authority claimed by Caesar, Napoleon and Bismarck was not grounded in abstract reason. The authority Nietzsche had in mind was meant to issue commands that did not require rational or dialectical justification. In contrast to Socrates's contrived intellectualism, and closer to Luther's voluntarism, Nietzsche understood that "wherever authority is still part of good ethical custom (*zur guten Sitten gehört*) and one does not 'give reason' (*begründet*), but commands (*befiehlt*), the dialectician is a kind of buffoon: he is laughed at, he is not taken seriously" (*Twilight of the Idols*, 2, 5).

Together with this notion of charismatic authority, Nietzsche also defended a conception of traditional authority. Though authority stems from personal, subjective dispositions it becomes embodied in traditional institutions that owe their existence, but not their continuity, to the will that established them. "For institutions to be possible there must exist a sort of will, instinct, imperative which cannot be otherwise than anti-liberal to the point of malice: the will to tradition, to authority to responsibility for centuries to come,

to *solidarity* between succeeding generations backwards and forwards in *infini-tum*" (251-252). Nietzsche then compared the contingency of freedom to the stability of institutions. "People live for the present, they live at top speed—they certainly live without a sense of responsibility; and this is precisely what they call 'freedom'. Everything in institutions which *makes* them institutions, is scorned, loathed and repudiated: everybody is in mortal fear of new slavery, wherever the word 'authority' is so much as whispered" (252).

As a liberal, Nietzsche recognized individual evaluative freedom and rejected the legitimacy of the interventionist modern democratic state. As a conservative critic of liberalism, he sought to restore the authority of spontaneous cultural formations, breeding ground for the heroic leaders and commanders he longed for.⁴ At no point, did he seek to subvert the notion of authority *per se* or refuse "to legitimate any figure of authority," as interpreters close to Derrida see it.⁵ The condition for the possibility of aristocratic leaders who can command the obedience of subordinates is their normative authority. A conception of a purely political, non-normative authority needs to be ruled out by definition.⁶ Authority gives ethical breadth and normative status to political relations involving command and obedience. It also elevates Nietzsche above the status of cultural critic or historian, and justifies him as a genuine political philosopher.

I should add that my use of Weber's well-known taxonomy to analyze Nietzsche's conception of authority is legitimized by the fact that he owes a debt to Nietzsche in this respect.⁷ Nietzsche did not explicitly distinguish three types of authority, but the Weberian taxonomy is apparent in his acceptance of traditional authority in *Twilight of the Idols*; in his praise for the authority that emanates from an "unconditional commander" like Napoleon; and in his denunciation of the "moral hypocrisy of the commanding class" in contemporary Europe, who wield formal legal and constitutional authority to protect themselves "from their bad conscience" (*Beyond Good and Evil* §199).

According to Weber, three types of authority serve as "grounds for the legitimacy of rulership (*Herrschaft*)."⁸ In the case of traditionalist authority, "the authority of the eternal yesterday,"⁹ rulership rests on the "belief in ordinary custom (*alltäglich Gewohntheit*) as the unswerving norm of conduct"¹⁰. Traditionalism assumes patriarchal and patrimonial forms, lending authority both to the father and the husband over members of the household, and to the nobility and sovereign prince over vassals and subjects.

Whereas traditionalism (or patriarchalism) extols the “sanctity of the ordinary,” charismatic rule underscores the “sanctity or value of the extraordinary.”¹¹ Those who obey the commands of charismatic leader do so because “of their belief in the extraordinary quality of a specific *person*.” Weber refers to magicians, prophets, warlords, and mentions specifically “Caesarist rulers” as one of his examples. “The legitimacy of their rule is grounded in the belief and devotion for the extraordinary, valued because it transcends normal human qualities and is therefore supernatural in its origins.” Charismatic figures are guided by “concrete revelations and inspirations,” and in that respect their authority is “irrational.” Such leaders do not have to appeal to “general norms”, and because they are “not bound to what actually exists,” they can break with tradition and introduce new directions.¹²

The problem faced by charismatic authority is succession. Who rules after the prophet or the warlord dies? Weber describes an ordinary process of “routinization” (*Veralltäglicung*) which leads to the establishment of rules of succession. This is the origin of what Weber calls “the rule of rules (*die Herrschaft von Regeln*).” From this moment on rulers no longer govern based on their personal qualities “but in virtue of acquired or inherited qualities.” In this way, the “process of ...traditionalization (*Traditionalisierung*) sets in.”¹³ Despite this similarity, this type of authority is not to be confused with traditionalism. We now face a thoroughly procedural system of rational rules. Weber describes it as “the triumph of *formalist* juristic rationalism.” Obedience and submission are no longer owed to charismatic persons, but there arises “an *impersonal* bond to the generally defined and functional ‘duty of office’”, whose purest expression is bureaucratic rule. Formal legal authority also coincides with what German jurisprudence defines as *Rechtsstaat* or the rule of law. According to Weber,

The official duty – like the corresponding right to exercise authority: the jurisdictional competency— is fixed by rationally established norms, by enactments, decrees, and regulations, in such a manner that the legitimacy of the authority becomes the legality of the general rule, which is purposefully thought out, enacted, and announced with formal correctness.¹⁴

Implicit in Weber’s synchronic taxonomy one finds a diachronic dimension. Authority, in its origins, is tied to tradition. One recognizes it in the customs that sustain the continuous existence of any original community. These customs tend naturally to fossilize and as a result rigid patterns of behaviour develop. Breaking up sclerotic modes of living and introducing

innovative directions is possible when leadership is assumed by charismatic individuals. Once the changes brought about by the charismatic leadership and a new mode of living is firmly in place, Weber acknowledges that a process of traditionalization (*Traditionalisierung*) sets in. But there is not turning back to traditional authority. A new form legitimation type, based on impersonal bonds, arises which Weber characterizes as formal legal authority and which is typical of modern societies.

¹ *Die Philosophie im Tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, Leipzig: Kröner, 1930, 274

² In *Nietzsche und Burckhardt*, Alfred von Martin defines the authoritarian liberal agenda of these historians: "Certainly, genuine authority cannot rest on the sheer reality of power. Authority in the highest sense is a conservative notion, which, in the case of Burckhardt, combines with the liberal notion of freedom to form a counter-revolutionary *complexio*" (Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1941, p. 65; my translation).

³ Recently, this position has been brilliantly defended by Vanessa Lemm in "Nietzsches Vision einer 'neuen Aristokratie'", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol 56 (2008), p. 370 & 373.

⁴ Nietzsche writes in the Nachlaß: "Ich habe keinen Menschen kennen gelernt, den ich in den *allgemeinsten Urteilen als Autorität* empfunden hätte: während ich ein tiefes Bedürfnis nach einem solchen Menschen hatte" (KSA 11, 26 [460]).

⁵ cf. Alan Schrift, "Questioning Authority: Nietzsche's Gift to Derrida," *Eurozine* (2008), 1.

⁶ In contrast to Shaw, I conceive the notion of authority as intrinsically normative (Tamsin Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁷ According to Horst Baier, "Weber's doctrine of charismatic authority is immediately determined by Nietzsche's perception of political Caesarism" (Horst Baier, "Die Gesellschaft—Ein Langer Schatten des Toten Gottes: Friedrich Nietzsche und die Entstehung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Décadence," *Nietzsche Studien*, vol 10/11 (1981-82), p. 26, my translation). For a comparison between the Nietzschean and Weberian notions of the process of rationalization, cf. Robert E. McGuinn, "Culture as Prophylactic: Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* as Culture Criticism", *Nietzsche Studien*, vol. 4 (1975), pp. 109 & 112

⁸ Max Weber, "Politik als Beruf", in *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, ed. by Johannes Winkelmann, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1971, p. 507. Cf. the Introduction to his series of studies titled "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen." *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1972.

⁹ Weber, 1971: 507)

¹⁰ Max Weber, "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen." *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1972 Weber, 1972: 269

¹¹ *ibid*: 269-270

¹² *ibid*: 269

¹³ *ibid*: 270

¹⁴ *ibid*: 272