

Re-Reading Nietzsche and Heidegger in an Age of Resurgent Fascism

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In the fateful fall of 2016, a far-right ideologue named Richard B. Spencer stirred up some fame for himself by exclaiming to a conference room packed with his followers not far from the White House: “Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!” On the face of it, this mad proclamation would appear to have nothing in common with the glorious tradition of Western philosophy. Not so fast: I think it would be a mistake to be too quick in arriving at that reassuring conclusion. Consider a few more provocative remarks ventilated by Spencer. “American society today is so just fundamentally bourgeois. It's just so, pardon my French ... it's so fucking middle class in its values. There is no value higher than having a pension and dying in bed. I find that profoundly pathetic. So, yeah, I think we might need a little more chaos in our politics, we might need a bit of that fascist spirit in our politics.” Or this: “I love empire, I love power, I love achievement,” quoted in a profile by Sarah Posner in the October 18, 2016 issue of Rolling Stone. Posner reports that “Spencer loves imperialism so much, he says, that he’ll sometimes ‘get a boner’ reading about Napoleon.” There is no question about the Nietzschean lineage of these sentiments. Spencer knows that they’re Nietzschean, and any honest reader of Nietzsche knows that they’re Nietzschean. Similar sentiments have been voiced by Jason Jorjani who, from January to August 2017, was Spencer’s “partner in crime” in AltRight.com. In a chilling video made available by the New York Times, Jorjani spoke of how he anticipated the creation of a new world order: “We will have a Europe, in 2050, where the banknotes have Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great.”

Or consider Spencer's ideological kinsman, Aleksandr Dugin. In April, 2014, Dugin participated in an hour-long interview with Russian television host Vladimir Posner. Near the end of the show, Posner asked Dugin: "Is there a philosophical quote that is especially dear to you?" Dugin responded: "Yes: man is something that should be overcome." Dugin didn't specify the source of this "especially dear" quote – probably because it would have revealed something of a tension with Dugin's strongly avowed adherence to Orthodox Christianity of the Old Believer variety. But he didn't need to specify the source: anyone with any acquaintance with Thus Spoke Zarathustra knows that it's Nietzsche. Anton Shekhovtsov, a commentator on Dugin, quotes an essay in which Dugin presents himself as a prophet of a "new aeon" that "will be cruel and paradoxical," involving slavery, "the renewal of archaic sacredness," and "a cosmic rampage of the Superhuman." Similarly, Shekhovtsov quotes another Dugin text affirming a vision of fascism that promises "to give birth to a society of the hero and Superhuman." Dugin is part Old Believer, part Nietzschean, part occultist, part bohemian, part warlord, part guru, part geopolitical strategist, and part plain maniac. (He's the postmodern subject par excellence!)

Inhabiting the same murky swamp is Julius Evola, the monocled baron, Italian exponent of über-fascism, and an explicit disciple of Nietzsche. Charles Clover, in an illuminating recent book on Dugin and his ideological forebears, gives a helpful glimpse into Evola's vision of caste-based Nietzschean neo-aristocracy: "he believed that war was a form of therapy, leading mankind into a higher form of spiritual existence." Or again Dugin, as recorded in the interview I've already cited: "The essence of the human being is to be a soldier." Such views capture quite well why the thinkers expressing these views are committed, in a faithfully Nietzschean spirit, to the root-and-branch rejection of the horizon of life embodied in liberal, bourgeois, egalitarian societies. Jason Jorjani published a book in 2017 which was reviewed on a far-right website. The

reviewer mentioned what he took to be “the alt-Right canon”: “Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt, [Alain] de Benoist, [Guillaume] Faye, Dugin.” Note well! Nietzsche #1, Heidegger #2. Richard Spencer, at a press conference during the same alt-right gathering at which he delivered his “Hail Trump” speech, said that the difference between the alt-right and others on the right is: “we actually read books.” And these are the books that they read.

Doug Saunders, a thoughtful Canadian journalist, wrote the following in the February 11, 2017 issue of The Globe and Mail: “Europe’s far-right parties have been ushered into prominence ... by a flood of bestsellers with titles such as Germany Abolishes Itself; The Last Days of Europe; After the Fall: The End of the European Dream and the Decline of a Continent; Reflections on the Revolution in Europe; Decline and Fall: Europe’s Slow-Motion Suicide; and Submission. All argue that a weakened, feminized, coddled, birth-controlled Western culture has become too soft and impassive to resist invasion and dominance by supposedly more muscular, more fertile and more aggressive Asian and Islamic cultures.” It would not be a difficult task to show that the original source of this rhetoric is traceable back to Nietzsche.

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How do we respond, humanly speaking, to a thinker who simply doesn’t believe in human dignity or the equal rights of all human beings? Someone who self-consciously denounces the whole moral universe conjured up by the French Revolution and believes that it didn’t secure a higher status for humanity but on the contrary incalculably diminished our stature? Who believes that in order to redeem such a thing as human dignity, we need to strive for something far beyond our current humanity, and in order to do that, need to restore the conceptions of radical hierarchy that were banished by the French Revolution and the whole post-French Revolution moral universe? We would barely know what to make of such a creature – wouldn’t really be

able to comprehend him even if he was staring us in the face! Stranger still, imagine that such a thinker went on to become one of the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century! And was championed to a very large extent by intellectuals of the left! Bizarre! Yet I am not sketching some hypothetical philosopher on Mars; this is Friedrich Nietzsche, who has influenced and shaped contemporary culture and intellectual life to a staggering degree. What do we make of all this? To be sure, there is a lot going on in the complex and multidimensional texts of Nietzsche, and it is easy to be thoroughly bewildered by the multiplicity of analyses and forms of rhetoric deployed by Nietzsche, often with the conscious intention of dazzling us and seducing us with his literary virtuosity. We need to stay focused on what is the central core of the fireworks show by which Nietzsche is trying to bewitch us. What is that core? Here's my suggestion: Western civilization, on Nietzsche's view, is going down the toilet because of too much emphasis on truth and rationality and too much emphasis on equal human dignity.

Let's turn briefly to Martin Heidegger. His basic idea, it seems, is that peasants, soldiers, and Romantic poets have a capacity for "communing with Being" that ordinary intellectuals and the educated middle class will never have. The history of the West is a process rendering our experience of the mystery of existence progressively more and more superficial, and "modernity" is the culmination (or the final nadir) of this process. Hence modernity has to be destroyed, and the sooner the better. Consider Leo Strauss's telling encapsulation of what those under the immediate spell of Heidegger took the project to be: "enthusiastic pupils of Heidegger said that Martin Heidegger marks the end of the epoch which was opened by another Martin, Martin Luther." By contrast to the inauthentic and deracinated existence available in a modern urban metropolis, Being and historicity are fully present in Heidegger's own cabin in the Black Forest, just as they were present in the temples of ancient Greece, put into a "primordial saying" by

Heraclitus and Sophocles. Heidegger denounces America as the epitome of “historylessness,” an incapacity to disclose or even make contact with the destiny of genuinely historical cultures. In other words, in order to imagine what habitation of a genuinely Heideggerian ethical-political universe would comprise, we would need to begin imagining what life would be like if human beings had never experienced the democratizing cultural revolutions associated with the Reformation and the Enlightenment, if urbanization and industrialization had never happened, and if Christian monotheism had never displaced the gods of the pagan world. And as for Heidegger’s typical privileging of Heraclitus and Sophocles: it’s eye-opening, and starkly sobering, to see how images of ancient Greece figure in the iconography of the contemporary far right. Just look at some ultra-right websites! I can more or less guarantee that it will have a strong effect on how one thereafter responds to Heideggerian (and Nietzschean) Hellenophile rhetoric. It’s easy to be drawn to the abstract language of “Being” as long as it’s serving to discredit those aspects of modernity that we dislike; but are any of us really prepared to entertain the possibility of the comprehensive cancelling-out of modernity to which Heidegger in his radicalism seems committed? And are we taking Heidegger seriously if we fail to think through exactly what this radicalism signifies?

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote the following: “The great majority of men have no right to life, and serve only to disconcert the elect among our race; I do not yet grant the unfit that right. There are even unfit peoples.” Martin Heidegger once wrote the following:

An enemy is each and every person who poses an essential threat to the Dasein [existence] of the people and its individual members. The enemy does not have to be external, and the external enemy is not even always the more dangerous one. And it can seem as if there were no enemy. Then it is a fundamental requirement to find the enemy,

to expose the enemy to the light, or even first to make the enemy, so that this standing against the enemy may happen and so that Dasein may not lose its edge.... [The challenge is] to bring the enemy into the open, to harbor no illusions about the enemy, to keep oneself ready for attack, to cultivate and intensify a constant readiness and to prepare the attack looking far ahead with the goal of total annihilation.

These are both incitements to genocide. The point of quoting these statements is not to impugn Nietzsche and Heidegger as important thinkers. Nietzsche was a great philosopher. Heidegger was a great philosopher. Nothing in these remarks is meant to challenge their intellectual stature. There's no intention on my part to expel them from the history of philosophy. But they are not innocent. Great thinkers can be dangerous thinkers. And to the extent that their ideas contribute to bad ideological currents in the present, we have to be alert to their non-innocence and do our utmost not to become their apologists. We need to commence a serious re-reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger because in the end these thinkers are not resources for the left, as we have so often been told that they are. In a longer-term view, they are more likely to be resources for the right and far right.

Richard Spencer and Aleksandr Dugin, scary as they are, are not unique cases. They are part of a new Fascist International that is becoming more and more assertive. And as incredible as it may seem, the alt-right managed to establish what had the appearance of a beach-head in Trump's White House. To be sure, Steve Bannon, the most important of these figures, was able to survive the knife-fights in the Trump White House only until August of 2017. Still, one has to ask what it says about the politics of the contemporary era that a dubious character like Bannon was ever considered worthy of a powerful office in the West Wing. In the chapter of Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind entitled "The Nietzscheanization of the Left or Vice

Versa,” Bloom wrote the following sentence: “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.” I’m not sure whether that sentence was ever fully true, but it’s certainly not true today.

Bloom’s most ambitious successor in the claim that the left has been hoodwinked by Nietzsche is himself a man of the left, namely Geoff Waite. But Waite goes beyond Bloom in further claiming that this was a deliberate project of Nietzsche’s: “Nietzsche programmed his reception in unconscious, subliminal ways.” This is, as Waite knows, a difficult thesis to prove, but I think it would be naïve to be too quick to dismiss it, and I think it’s a big shame that intellectuals of the left (or just intellectuals in general) haven’t been more appreciative of Waite’s sharp insights into what he calls “Nietzsche’s intent to have an influenzalike impact on the future.” As Waite says, “Left-Nietzscheans and Right-Nietzscheans find themselves in the same bed together, as day breaks and the Dionysian revel of the night is transformed into hangover, and no owl of Athena has taken flight.” If, as Waite also suggests, Nietzsche has become (or has manipulated his way into becoming) the master thinker of “the real Right and fake Left alike,” then a very profound re-reading of Nietzsche is required. And, as Waite again fully understands, the same intellectual operation of wary re-reading needs to be applied to Heidegger.

For decades, young intellectuals have been encouraged by their teachers to regard Nietzsche and Heidegger as friends and allies of the contemporary left. As I’ve just highlighted, there have been isolated voices within the intellectual community warning that perhaps there is a little more poison in these thinkers than their enthusiasts in the academy have bargained for. And it may well be that we are currently seeing the coming-to-fruit of some of this poison. One

notable case in point is the Nietzschean doctrine that appeals to truth are largely an ideology designed to obfuscate the deeper realities of power and resentment. This doctrine got enthusiastically taken up by Michel Foucault with his attempt to see truth as a normative aspiration exposed as a mask for what are in reality cynical “regimes of truth.” And what do we have today? “Post-truth”! (As Timothy Snyder rightly says: “Post-truth is pre-fascism.”) Nietzschean notions, mediated by supposedly emancipatory appropriations of Nietzsche, seem to have left us vulnerable to harsh new ideologies that appear to regard respect for truth as a snare for the strong set by the weak (as Nietzsche largely presents it).

Let us return to Richard Spencer. Prior to the election of Trump, it would have been unthinkable to imagine that a lunatic ideologue like that could have any connections, however remote, to the corridors of power in the most powerful republic in the Western world. It is a sobering reflection on our current situation to note that that is no longer necessarily true. Soon after the election, Spencer, obviously energized by an election outcome that he (and many others) saw as a triumph for the alt-right, released a podcast in which he said the following: “I think Bannon is a wild card, and a wild card is good.... Bannon has made gestures towards us; he’s said Breitbart is a platform for the alt-right. He’s apparently read Julius Evola and Alexander Dugin. Make of that what you will.... We want a wild card; we want change. So, I think Bannon is a good thing.” And Bannon himself plays to this kind of radicalism when he boasts that the Trump regime, under his guidance, entails “the birth of a new political order.” Where do we look in trying to trace the source of the virulently anti-liberal, anti-democratic radicalism of a Richard Spencer? According to an August 31, 2015 story in the Chicago Tribune, Spencer “credits his time at the University of Chicago ... for his intellectual flowering, which includes a kinship with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.” During that Masters program,



completed in 2003, he apparently took a graduate seminar on Nietzsche, and was hooked. Obviously, not many people taking seminars on the thought of Nietzsche in grad school will turn into neo-fascists. It doesn't follow from that fact that there aren't things in Nietzsche's work (or in Heidegger's) capable of turning people into neo-fascists. And clearly this wouldn't be the urgent cause for worry that it currently is if it weren't true that our contemporary world is populated by far more neo-fascists than we may have imagined until quite recently.

Obviously, we don't want this to turn into an exercise in conspiracy theorizing. Let's leave that to the ideologues. But if something is dangerous, we need to be aware that it's dangerous. And that awareness has been woefully lacking in regard to several of the most influential philosophers of the last 150 years. The contemporary resurgence of far-right politics forces us to command heightened vigilance with respect to the directly practical implications of what Mark Lilla in 2001 called "the reckless mind," or what Georg Lukács in 1952 called "the destruction of reason."

"Where are the barbarians of the twentieth century?" Every reader of Nietzsche knows that line from The Will to Power, section 868. Those sympathetic to Nietzsche (apart from fascists) need to find some way to brush it off – as a kind of joke or just a provocation. For of course within merely a few decades the world knew exactly where to find these barbarians – in the heart of Europe. We could perhaps revert to the benign view of why Nietzsche asked that question if someone could give us absolute assurances that there would be no similar barbarians of the twenty-first century. But today we know for a fact that no such assurances are forthcoming. Clover, in Black Wind, White Snow, writes the following about the ideological landscape in Russia during the Yeltsin years: "For many provincial Russian youths, languishing in stultifying mining towns and crushing poverty, the NBP [the neo-fascist political party co-led

by Dugin and Eduard Limonov in the 1990s] offered a rush of adrenalin.” It seems strange to think that there could be anything in common between Yeltsin-era Russia and contemporary America; yet ideologically, surveying the scene in 2017, it does seem as if there is some kind of thread joining them. Let me try out my own version of Clover’s sentence (which may be a highly imperfect parallel in all kinds of ways, and yet still capture something important): “For many young people in the suburbs and small towns of the American heartland, facing the despair of unemployment or the even worse despair of stultifying and meaningless work in anonymous offices, the alt-right offers a rush of adrenalin.”

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Since the Enlightenment, there has been a line of important thinkers for whom life in liberal modernity is felt to be profoundly dehumanizing. Thinkers in this category include, but are not limited to, Maistre, Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, and Heidegger. For such thinkers, liberal modernity is so humanly degrading that one ought to (if one could) undo the French Revolution and its egalitarianism, and perhaps cancel out the whole moral legacy of Christianity. For all of them, hierarchy and rootedness is more morally compelling than equality and individual liberty; democracy is seen as diminishing our humanity rather than elevating it. We are unlikely to understand why fascism is still kicking around in the 21<sup>st</sup> century unless we are able to grasp why certain intellectuals of the early twentieth century gravitated towards fascism, namely, on account of a grim preoccupation with the perceived soullessness of modernity, and a resolve to embrace any politics, however extreme, that seemed to them to promise “spiritual renewal,” to quote Heidegger. For these thinkers (and their contemporary adherents), liberalism, egalitarianism, and democracy are a recipe for absolute deracination, and hence for a profound

contraction of the human spirit, which presumably is what Heidegger had in mind when he spoke of spiritual renewal. For the political-philosophical tradition within which Nietzsche and Heidegger stand, the French Revolution inaugurates a moral universe where authority resides with the herd, not with the shepherd, with the mass (the “They”), not with the elite, and as a consequence, ultimately the whole experience of life spirals down into unbearable shallowness and meaninglessness. Ferdinand Mount, in a recent New York Review of Books essay on Goethe, writes that Nietzsche viewed Goethe as an anticipation of the culture of the Übermensch for which Nietzsche yearned because “only Goethe had treated the French Revolution and the doctrine of equality with the disgust they deserved.” That’s exactly right! And that’s no less the case with Heidegger. In a postwar work entitled What Is Called Thinking? (1954), he invoked Nietzsche as a crucial authority on the deficiencies of a democratic culture. Nietzsche’s project, writes Heidegger, is “to clear the field for the great decisions,” and he makes emphatically clear that these decisions are out of reach as long as liberal democracy remains the reigning political order in Europe. “What did the Second World War really decide? .... This world war has decided nothing,” wrote Heidegger; meaning: any historical outcome that leaves liberal modernity intact counts for nothing. Hence the defeat of European fascism was of no consequence (!) because it left the spiritual emptiness of modernity just as it was.

Nietzsche and Heidegger despise liberalism. They despise democracy. And they despise modernity for being what they see as the inevitable consequence of the decadence of liberalism and democracy. These views are perfectly clear in their writings, and insofar as readers miss this decisively important dimension of their thought, my little book tries to lay this out clearly enough that it can’t be missed or excused. But the root-and-branch anti-liberalism and anti-egalitarianism of Nietzsche and Heidegger has not stopped generations of academics on the

cultural and intellectual left from elevating these two thinkers to a singular status of pre-eminence: they are treated as oracles, if not as deities in the pantheon of the contemporary academy. Maybe we need to start re-considering the cultural and philosophical authority accorded to them.

Nietzsche's formula of the death of God and Heidegger's formula of the forgetfulness of Being are two ways of articulating a shared intuition: that there is a spiritual void at the heart of modernity. I don't think that anyone can in good conscience affirm with full confidence that that's a false problem or a false concern. But here's the point: It's one thing to avail oneself of Nietzschean or Heideggerian insights into the spiritual deficiencies of modernity, if those deficiencies exist, in a context where a commitment to liberal democracy (on the part of the whole world, or at least on the part of societies in the West) is reasonably secure. It's something quite different to turn to Nietzsche and Heidegger for philosophical and cultural guidance in a context where that commitment is not fully secure, or is actively insecure. And here's the main point I'm trying to make in this lecture: The context in which we currently find ourselves is the latter one.

Many of us are reeling these days. We had more or less assumed that things were steadily moving towards a global embrace of liberal-democratic norms and principles. That no longer seems so assured. In fact, if anything the politics of authoritarianism seems to be on the rise. In Russia we now have Putinism. In the U.S., Trumpism and Bannanism. In Hungary, Orbanism. In Turkey, Erdoganism. In India, Modiism. In China, Xiism. In the Philippines, Duterteism. Admittedly, none of these people are as bad as Hitler or Mussolini or Stalin. But at the same time, none of them are reliable guardians of liberal democracy. We have seen, particularly in the last year or two, a rebellion against liberal elites and the upsurge of far-right populism. It started

with Brexit. Prime Minister David Cameron of Great Britain obviously set in motion the Brexit referendum because he couldn't imagine the people of the U.K. actually voting for it. But they did, albeit by a fairly slim margin. Then Donald Trump! How could 63 million Americans possibly think that a carnival hustler like that could be a credible president? How could people suffering the dislocations of a rapidly globalizing modernity think that a selfish plutocrat like Trump cares about them? That celebrity matters more than wisdom and experience? That he's not impugned as a leader by his obvious character flaws (pathological narcissism, pathological vanity, limitless greed, loyalty to no one but himself and perhaps his children)? That it's okay for women to vote for someone who brags about molesting women? That it's okay for a country founded on multi-ethnic immigration to slam the door on Muslims qua Muslims? That someone who so obviously possesses not a particle of piety can be a suitable instrument of piety? Have people's critical faculties been so corroded by decades of immersion in a moronic celebrity culture that Trump's demagoguery and obvious unfitness for office didn't strike them as disqualifying? So it would appear. One is left shaking one head's about the state of contemporary citizenship. Trump's election was bad enough. But he followed it up with the appointment of various alt-right types to high positions in his Administration, and has himself continued to send out coded or not-so-coded encouragement to the ugliest elements of the far right. Just think: A year and a half ago, hardly anyone even knew what the alt-right meant! Hardly anyone had ever heard of Richard Spencer and his new Fascist International. Well, we've all heard of them now. We seem to have entered a new dispensation, a new Zeitgeist. In the words famously spoken by Steve Bannon: "We are witnessing the birth of a new political order." One has to say, it does feel like that.

My UPP editor, Damon Linker, summed up the central theme of my book as follows: “discussion and thinking in the West has been dominated by centrist liberal managerialism for the past several decades. Now that’s being challenged by virulent anti-liberals.” So: centrist liberal managerialism is unsatisfying. It’s not inspiring enough. It doesn’t move the soul. It’s banal; it’s a politics for the last man. Fine. And with what do we undertake to replace it? A regime of warriors and priests? A return from Enlightenment to magic? An appeal to the depths of the Volk (or Nietzsche’s pan-European successor to the Volk, whatever that might be)? Why be satisfied with what David Hume called “the calm sunshine of the mind” (which for him characterized the experience of Enlightenment morality) if we can insist upon a more bracing vision of life where the stakes are authentically life-and-death ones? Or where the unflinching confrontation with death promises a better-than-bourgeois authenticity, à la Heidegger? In Thus Spoke Zarathustra (“Zarathustra’s Prologue,” section 4), Nietzsche wrote: “I love the great despisers because they are the great reverers and arrows of longing for the other shore.” Well, “the other shore” sounds good because, by definition, we have no idea what life will be like there. In the meantime, we are urged to put lots of energy into despising what perhaps doesn’t meet Nietzsche’s standards of grandeur yet almost certainly deserves more respect than it receives from him or those swayed by his rhetoric. As I’ve already indicated, I don’t rule out the possibility that Nietzsche and Heidegger successfully articulate aspects of spiritual or cultural vacuity in the liberal-egalitarian dispensation that defines modernity. But what they offer by way of new dispensations to supplant spiritless modernity is far worse. One has to ask: who ever gave us a guarantee that the problem of the human condition admits of a solution?

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