

Race, Class, Tragedy. Nietzsche and the Fantasies of Europe

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Abstract: This essay revisits Nietzsche's meta-political (or archi-political) speculations about Europe through the interlocking prisms of class and race. It explores the extent to which something like a 'class racism' – or, in Domenico Losurdo's formulation, a 'transversal racism' – can be seen to operate in Nietzsche's anti-democratic visions of European unification. In a concluding section, it traces elements of Nietzsche's later problematisation of a European 'great politics' in the often-neglected political dimension of his writings on Ancient Greek tragedy and the cultural necessity of slavery, while also touching upon the way in which these writings have served as a resource for anti-colonial poetics.

Keywords: Aimé Césaire, class racism, Domenico Losurdo, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wole Soyinka, slavery, tragedy

The attempt to unify Europe and to turn it into the ruler of the Earth ... is not placed at the margins of Nietzsche's philosophy, but at its centre.

– Karl Löwith, 'European Nihilism'

The homogenizing of European man is the great process that cannot be obstructed: one should even hasten it. The necessity to create a gulf, distance, order of rank, is given *eo ipso* – *not* the necessity to retard this process.

– Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 898

There is a handwritten draft in which Caesar instead of Zarathustra is the bearer of Nietzsche's tidings. That is of no little moment. It underscores the fact that Nietzsche had an inkling of his doctrine's complicity with imperialism.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Therefore, comrade, you will hold as enemies – loftily, lucidly,

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1 An early version of this paper was delivered at the University of Salford in 2007, under the title 'Nietzsche, (Class) Racism, and the Fantasies of Europe'. Many thanks to Carlos Frade for the original invitation.

consistently – not only sadistic governors and greedy bankers, not only prefects who torture and colonists who flog, not only corrupt, check-licking politicians and subservient judges, but likewise and for the same reason, venomous journalists, goitrous academics, wreathed in dollars and stupidity, ethnographers who go in for metaphysics, presumptuous Belgian theologians, chattering intellectuals born stinking out of the thigh of Nietzsche...

– Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

Over and above the struggle between nations the object of our terror was that international hydra-head, suddenly and so terrifyingly appearing as a sign of quite different struggles to come.

– Nietzsche, letter to Carl von Gersdorff, 21 June 1871

Europe United Against Itself

What would Friedrich Nietzsche make of the preamble of the TCE, the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, signed in 2004 (and left unratified after its rejection in French and Dutch referenda in 2005)? This evidently facetious question is meant to indicate just how alien the German philosopher's diagnosis of and prognosis for Europe, together with his conceptual persona of the 'Good European', is from the reformist homilies that preface the treaty, especially once it was controversially purged of its specific reference to Christianity. The treaty sets out by declaring that it draws its inspiration from 'the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law'. Could there be a more exhaustive enumeration of everything that Nietzsche perceives as the engine of European decadence, its succumbing to slave morality after 'the last great slave rebellion which began with the French revolution'?² Wouldn't Nietzsche perceive this as the constitution of the untouchable 'Chandala', of the 'unbred people, the human hodgepodge',³ when the TCE states that it will continue on Europe's path of progress and civilization for the sake of 'the good of all its inhabitants, including the weakest and most deprived'? This is the 'unmanly' Europe incessantly castigated by Nietzsche, the one

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2 *Beyond Good and Evil*, par. 46, Nietzsche 1966, p. 61.

3 "'Improving" Humanity', in *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche 2005, p. 184.

that suffers from the 'bad taste' of indulging in pity and 'a pathological sensitivity and receptivity to pain'.⁴

There is no congruence between the consensual, gradualist image of a united Europe offered by today's capitalist parliamentarianism and Nietzsche's insistent attempts to think Europe as a site both of decadence and transvaluation; indeed, we could even say that in Nietzsche's work we may locate an anticipatory diagnosis of the impasses of precisely such a Europe.⁵ My contention, however, is that this Nietzschean critique, useful as it may prove in corroding the vapid self-confidence of a rudderless Europe, must in turn be taken apart, and radically criticized for its reliance on a whole host of arbitrary, reactionary and sterile themes and affirmations – chief among them the notions of rank and mastery, with its associated treatment of the agonies and birth-pangs of civilization as a psycho-cosmic drama detached from the vicissitudes of historical struggle and of what we may call the 'uneven and combined development' of nihilism. More succinctly, it will be argued – in the wake of Domenico Losurdo's monumental critical reconstruction *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*⁶ – that though we can still cherish and refunction Nietzsche thought's for its destructive-diagnostic insight, at the level of programme and prognosis it represents a dead end, or a deadening beginning.

But what does European unification mean for Nietzsche? In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he paints a Europe whose leaders and peoples are wilfully ignoring the tendency towards, and need for, unification. We encounter here one of the relatively invariant themes in Nietzsche's mature thought, after an earlier infatuation with the 'German essence' (*das Deutsche Wesen*), his contempt for what he calls 'the pathological estrangement which the insanity of nationality has induced, and still induces, among the people of Europe',⁷ which, joined to the 'demagogic character and the intention to appeal the masses ... common to all political parties',⁸ accounts for the baleful state of late nineteenth-century Europe. It is against the myopia of populist politicians and their doomed 'separatist' policies that Nietzsche affirms that '*Europe wants to become one*'.⁹ What does this unification signify? First of all, it is important to keep in mind that it is in the works of a disparate republic of geniuses ('Napoleon, Goethe, Beethoven, Stendhal, Heinrich Heine, Schopenhauer', and

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4 *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 293, Nietzsche 1966, p. 231.

5 See the incisive article by Benjamin Noys in this issue for an interrogation of the broader resonances and impasses of Nietzsche's figuration of Europe. See also Elbe 2002.

6 Losurdo 2002 and 2019. See also the précis in Losurdo 1999.

7 *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 256, Nietzsche 1966, p. 196.

8 *Human, All Too Human*, Volume I, § 438, Nietzsche 1996a, p. 161.

9 *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 256, Nietzsche 1966, p. 196.

even a rehabilitated Wagner) that the ‘new synthesis’ is prepared and the ‘European of the future’ is anticipated experimentally. Secondly, the suggestion that these towering figures are media for the tormented birth of Europe indicates that Nietzsche’s concept of Europe is not *stricto sensu* political, or geopolitical, but ‘spiritual’. Speaking of his precursors of the European man, Nietzsche writes: ‘In all the heights and depths of their needs, they are related, fundamentally related: it is Europe, the one Europe, whose soul surges and longs to get further and higher through their manifold and impetuous art’¹⁰ – this is a Europe, of course, whose destiny remains unwritten and uncertain. Third, for Nietzsche European unity is a question of rank: these great thinkers, as he put it, taught ‘their century ... the century of the *crowd!* – the concept “higher man”’.¹¹

The synthesis of a spiritual Europe for the sake of the production, or enhancement, of a higher breed of men – this is what lies at the basis of Nietzsche’s passion for European unification. But, of course, Nietzsche does not shrink back from a political, or rather archi-political, understanding of Europe – if we understand ‘archi-political’, following Alain Badiou, as what qualifies a declaration that can only manifest itself in a ‘subjective exposition’ (and ultimately in Nietzsche’s final political delirium), for, having no event as its condition, it presumes that politics can arise from the act of thought alone, and is thus incapable of ‘distinguishing its efficacy from its announcement’.¹² As Badiou argues in ‘Who is Nietzsche?’:

Nietzsche’s anti-philosophical act, of which he is at once the prophet, the actor, and the name, aims at nothing less than at breaking the history of the world in two. I would say that this act is archi-political, in that it intends to revolutionise the whole of humanity at a more radical level than that of the calculations of politics. Archi-political does not here designate the traditional philosophical task of finding a foundation for politics. The logic, once again, is a logic of rivalry [versus politics], and not a logic of foundational eminence.¹³

In his ‘European Nihilism’, a text written in 1939 in his Japanese semi-exile and significantly subtitled ‘Reflections on the Spiritual and

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 197.

12 Badiou 1992, p. 14. See also Badiou 2015, for the seminars coeval to this conference on Nietzsche. In a fascinating pre-war engagement with Nietzsche, combining sympathy and admiration for the German philosopher’s ‘tragic dialectic’ with trenchant critique of its insuperable limits, Henri Lefebvre already pointed out Nietzsche’s tendency to try and resolve through desperate, lyrical decrees (as well as failed recoveries of possibilities past), the uneven, motley interregnum in which he was condemned to live – a product, in Lefebvre’s view, of the arrested impetus of the 1848 revolutions. See Lefebvre 1939.

13 Badiou 2002, p. 4.

Historical Background of the European war’,¹⁴ Karl Löwith identified Europe as the key concept in Nietzsche’s conception of a new ‘ordering’ that would overcome the impasses of nihilism:

The great goal for Nietzsche is the spiritual and political dominion of Europeans over the earth. To force Europe to this ‘great politics’, which is at the same time a ‘war between spirits’, it must be confronted with the question ‘whether its will to down-going “wills”’, that is to say, what is at stake is whether Europe will overcome its own nihilism, once again willing itself as a whole and as something decisive. This active and ‘ecstatic’ nihilism is a powerful impetus and a hammer that obliges the degenerate nations and the Russians to surrender, and creates a new order of life.

What is specifically archi-political in Nietzsche’s stance, once again following Badiou’s definition, is the identification between Europe and his own person. As Löwith puts it: ‘The fate of Europe coincides in Nietzsche’s thought and sentiment with himself’. But, beyond this coincidence, what are the modalities of political unification envisaged by Nietzsche? If we avoid the position of a ‘hermeneutics of innocence’ that would regard all of Nietzsche’s pronouncements as metaphorical – a choice that enervates his thought, turning him into a Rortyan liberal ironist or an eclectic anarchist – it is difficult to deny that Nietzsche’s vision of Europe is one based on the emergence of a radical hierarchy that could give a form to the continent’s political chaos, breaking asunder national populisms for the sake of a new, tendentially planetary ordering. As Löwith notes, in order to forge the single, decisive will necessary for such a great politics, now ‘that the time of the small politics of nationality is past’, Nietzsche envisages the necessity of ‘a dominant caste with long-term aims, capable of taming the masses to this end’.

Democracy, Class Racism and the ‘Good European’: Racialisation Without Race?

The political horizon of a united and fiercely hierarchical Europe of breeding and affirmation is inextricably linked to another connotation of Europe that for Nietzsche poses at once the danger of a depleting passive nihilism and the opportunity for a kind of post-Christian regeneration. Democratisation is thus, in Derridean parlance, a kind of *pharmakon*, or at the very least an occasion to be seized in the battle against so-called ‘slave morality’. But how could the levelling occasioned by ‘democratisation’ presage anything affirmative? After all, one of Nietzsche’s invariant convictions, from his early writings onwards, seems

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14 Löwith 1995.

to posit the need for social stratification (and more brutally, slavery¹⁵) for the sake of cultural enhancement and the intensification of spiritual life. In an aphorism entitled 'Culture and caste', he writes: 'A higher culture can come into existence only where there are two different castes in society: that of the workers and that of the idle, of those capable of true leisure; or, expressed more vigorously: the caste compelled to work and the caste that works if it wants to'.¹⁶ This seemingly obvious lesson from ancient Greece and Indian caste-society, which Jacques Rancière has relentlessly invalidated,¹⁷ is further specified by Nietzsche in an aphorism, also from *Human, All Too Human*, entitled 'My Utopia'. There we read that in a 'better ordering of society the heavy work and exigencies of life will be apportioned to him who suffers least as a consequence of them', in a rank-ordering from the 'most insensible' labourers to the 'most sensitive' masters, who find suffering even at the apex of comfort.¹⁸

That is, there is a difference in kind, or difference of nature, registered at the level of 'sensitivity' between the dominant and the dominated, the lords and the slaves. Nietzsche's utopia is thus a naturalised translation of these pre-political affects and competencies into a social order understood primarily, it should be noted, at the level of the division of labour (and of the division of labour into the manual and the intellectual). But how could the levelling process that appears to accompany the 'evolving European' permit such a political translation of differences of nature? And, most importantly, isn't such an identification of essential political types in tension, if not stark contradiction, with Nietzsche's unsparing assault in *On the Genealogy of Morality* on the metaphysics of a doer behind the deed, of a subject behind the action – something that could also be extended to cover his treatment of Europe as spirit and subject?

Allegedly considering Europe's 'democratic movement' *sine ira et studio*, Nietzsche limns a process of blending and deterritorialisation: 'The Europeans are becoming more similar to each other; they become more and more detached from the conditions under which races originate that are tied to some climate or class; they become increasingly independent of any *determinate* milieu'.¹⁹ But Nietzsche's hopeful gaze, as ever, is not turned towards the collective effects of this 'physiological' transformation, but to the kinds of possibilities such a transformation affords for the breeding of a new type of creative and affirmative being. The future European man in the making is thus 'an essentially

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15 Ruehl 2018.

16 *Human, All Too Human*, Volume I, § 439, Nietzsche 1996a, p. 162.

17 Rancière 2004.

18 Ibid., § 462, pp. 168-9.

19 *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 242, Nietzsche 1966, p. 176.

supra-national and nomadic type of man ... a type that possesses, physiologically speaking, a maximum of the art and power of adaptation as its typical distinction'.²⁰ But Nietzsche is too disabused, or perhaps too materialist an aristocratic thinker to consider that the emergence of his new type could do without the deep-seated and frequently brutal inequalities that accompany higher, 'affirmative' cultures.

Thus, for the process of European unification and democratisation really to present an escape from the mere dilution of cultural energies, to propose new values, which is to say new hierarchies, then it requires, unwittingly perhaps, to generate a new stratification. And this is exactly what Nietzsche stipulates: 'The very same conditions that will on the average lead to the levelling and mediocrization of man – to a useful, industrious, handy, multi-purpose herd animal – are likely in the highest degree to give birth to exceptional human beings of the most dangerous and attractive quality'.²¹ Thus the new adaptive and affirmative type will be accompanied in Europe by 'the production of a type that is prepared for slavery' in the shape of 'manifold garrulous workers who will be poor in will, extremely employable, and as much in need of a master and commander as of their daily bread'.²² In linking democratisation with a new tyranny, Nietzsche thus repeats an argument encapsulated in § 956 from *The Will to Power*: 'The same conditions that hasten the evolution of the herd animal also hasten the evolution of the leader animal'.²³ In other words, the 'pathos of distance' might be reborn through the very physiology of levelling: this is Nietzsche's hope for Europe, as a land where the order of rank could identify a transnational *Herrenvolk*, or master-race, supported by the ranks of an insensitive, enslaved sub-proletariat. Losurdo has argued that this vision of a class and/or race aristocracy whose members celebrate themselves as equals is widespread in nineteenth-century thought, pitilessly cutting across the putative divide between 'liberals' and 'conservatives'.

It is a hope that was already present in Nietzsche's presentation of the conceptual persona and archi-political figure of the 'Good European' in *Human, All Too Human*. In aphorism § 475 of that book, entitled 'European man and the abolition of nations', Nietzsche salutes the 'destruction of nations' and the emergence, on the basis of nomadism and 'continual crossing' of a new, mixed race, the European.²⁴ He advances a powerful analysis of the demagogic uses of nationalism by 'princely dynasties' and 'certain commercial and social classes'

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Nietzsche 1968, p. 501.

24 Nietzsche 1996a, p. 174.

and presents such a European unification as the only cure against the sickness of anti-Semitism, which is a corollary of pathological fanaticism and manipulative policies surrounding the nation. Is this seemingly 'progressive' anti-nationalism at odds with the relentless insistence on rank-ordering and breeding? Does this paean to 'crossbreeding' remove Nietzsche's associations with nineteenth-century racism and Social Darwinism?

Trying to move beyond Lukács's schematic and frequently untenable treatment of Nietzsche's anticipations of imperialist ideology and 'indirect apologetics' for capitalism,²⁵ the Italian Marxist historian of ideas Domenico Losurdo has proposed a manner of conceptualising the persistence of a thinking of race and hierarchy in Nietzsche without falling into the patently contradictory pursuit of presenting him as a German nationalist or an anti-Semite. In his *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel*, Losurdo makes an important conceptual distinction between what he calls 'horizontal racialisation' and 'transversal racialisation'.²⁶ The first of these relates to the essentialist identification of certain nations or groups as simply and invariably superior or inferior. But Nietzsche, as his diagnosis of European democratisation makes patent, can have no truck with a mere reiteration of populist, traditional 'sectarian' drives. On the contrary, as his future-oriented, speculative eugenic schemes imply, the generation of new evaluative hierarchies and the breeding of new types cut across – specifically, by way of 'crossbreeding' – received national and racial distinctions. But what does remain invariant in this process is precisely the idea of rank and the naturalisation of inequality that Nietzsche had already outlined in his 'utopia' from *Human, All Too Human*.²⁷ In other words, the master-race may, or must, be mixed.

The core element of Nietzsche's practice of differentiation within the process of European levelling and hierarchical separation is, according to Losurdo, the racialisation of class, a racialisation which is transversal inasmuch as it cuts across customary distinctions between races and nations (German, French, Jewish, etc.): 'The constant element in the Nietzsche's complex evolution is the tendency to racialise subaltern classes',²⁸ which are treated alternatively as a barbarian caste of slaves, a fanatical rabble, a collection of instruments of labour for the dominant classes, a crowd of 'semi-bestial' beings, or a motley crew of failures and biological rejects. Nietzsche thus partakes of the tendency within Western liberal and anti-revolutionary thought that treats the

25 Lukács 1981, esp. Ch. 3: 'Nietzsche as founder of irrationalism in the imperialist period'.

26 Losurdo 2002, pp. 433-7 and 823-6.

27 On the centrality of hierarchy to Nietzsche's political thought, from his first to his last writings, see the introduction in Nietzsche 2004.

28 Losurdo 2002, p. 823.

proletarian as an *instrumentum vocale* (Edmund Burke) or 'biped tool' (the abbé Sieyès). It is for this reason that a crossbreeding of 'higher men', of elites derived from the most varied 'nations', is perfectly compatible in Nietzsche with, as Losurdo puts it, 'an international civil war, which transcends state borders, and witnesses "civil" European elites jointly battling the threat posed by "barbarians", whether internal or external to the West'.²⁹ We can thus see why Christianity and socialism represent for Nietzsche a conjoined nemesis, especially inasmuch as Christianity crystallises 'the general revolt of the downtrodden, the miserable, the malformed, the failures, against anyone with "breeding", – the eternal vengeance of the Chandala as a *religion of love*'.³⁰

In this respect, Nietzsche's thinking can be recontextualised in terms of a long tradition of anti-socialist nineteenth-century thinking which depended, as Étienne Balibar has shown, on the '*institutional racialization of manual labour*'.³¹ This is a position, we might also note, which rests on a nostalgic and utterly deficient understanding of the relationship between cultural 'enhancement', exploitation and the division of labour – note the constant references to Nietzsche to systems of hierarchy and caste where the combination of stratification, homogenisation and class conflict proper to the nineteenth-century European context would be averted. It is in this sense that Nietzsche's vision of a unified and hierarchical Europe, in which internal domination would presage external power, is a phenomenon of the '*new racism* of the bourgeois era ... the one which has as its target the *proletariat* in its dual status as exploited population ... and politically threatening population'.³² It is worth noting, in light of Nietzsche's unsavoury fixation on the 'Chandala', that Balibar regards contemporary racism not only as constantly overdetermined by class struggle, but as the transposition of notions and practices of caste.³³

Perhaps the driving reason behind Nietzsche's partaking of this form of anti-socialist nineteenth-century class racism lies in his inability to distinguish between a levelling equivalence and an innovative and

29 Losurdo 2002, p. 426.

30 "'Improving" Humanity', in *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche 2005, p. 185. Note how the orientalist framing of an Indian or 'Aryan' caste-system functions here as the counter to all the improvers of mankind, with their concealment of the immoral foundations of any morality.

31 Balibar 1992, p. 210.

32 Balibar 1992, p. 209.

33 Balibar 1992, p. 207: Several historians of racism (Leon Poliakov, Michele Duchet and Madeleine Reberioux, Colette Guillaumin, Eric Williams on modern slavery, and others) have laid emphasis upon the fact that the modern notion of race, in so far as it is invested in a discourse of contempt and discrimination and serves to split humanity up into a 'super-humanity' and a 'sub-humanity', did not initially have a national (or ethnic), but a class signification or rather (since the point is to represent the inequality of social classes as inequalities of nature) a caste signification'. On the relation between race, class and caste, see also Cox 1948.

'transvaluing' equality. As Mazzino Montinari has argued, against Lukács, a certain suspicion if not critique of equality as a political category was even shared by the likes of Engels; and it might further be argued that Nietzsche himself was more acquainted with a bland, Christian socialism than with the more affirmative and uncompromising aspects of Marxist and communist thought³⁴ – though his class panic at the deeds of the Paris Commune, to which I'll turn in the conclusion, may not incline us to judge that his hostility would have been attenuated by a better acquaintance with the revolutionary vulgate. Nietzsche's handling of the problem of the proletariat in his own work is never capable of breaking out of the alternative between necessary subordination (such as in his speculations about the necessary 'Sinification' of the European working class³⁵), on the one hand, and colonial expansionism via the working or *lumpen* elements of the European population, on the other. In other words, the racialised domestication of class into caste, accompanied by a supercharged settler-colonialism, seems to exhaust the utopia of a cosmopolitanism of domination. Thus, in *Daybreak*, a seemingly rousing attack on the mechanisation of the labour-force and 'impersonal enslavement', and a related critique of the idea of a social-democratic discipline of the working-class in view of future victories, issue into nothing more than a kind of social-imperialist epic, in which Europe is expanded and renewed by 'an age of a great swarming-out such as has never been seen before, and through this act of free emigration in the grand manner to protest against the machine, against capital, and against the choice now threatening them of being compelled to become either a slave of the state or the slave of the party of disruption'.³⁶ Hence the slogan: 'Let Europe be relieved of a fourth part of its inhabitants! They and it will be better for it!' The criminal degeneration of the working-class will thus, in Nietzsche's imaginings, give rise – as European virtues go a-wandering across the globe 'in distant lands and in the undertakings of swarming trains of colonists' – to a 'wild beautiful naturalness and be called heroism' (and Europe itself might make do with 'numerous Chinese' with their 'modes of life and thought suitable to industrious ants' and even lend Europe some Asiatic perseverance by way of cross-breeding).³⁷

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34 Montinari 2003.

35 Losurdo 2002, pp. 330-4.

36 *Daybreak*, § 206, Nietzsche 1997, p. 207. p. See Brennan 2014, pp. 173-4. Brennan's chapter on 'Nietzsche and the Colonies' is of particular interest for its foregrounding of the relation between counterphilology, antiphilosophy and a kind of imperialist meta-politics in Nietzsche's work.

37 Ibid.

Beyond European Universalism

In Nietzsche's musing on the 'impossible class', as in his thoughts about tyranny, slavery and democratization, or his fervent anti-nationalism, we encounter an important archi-political theme in his work: the need for Europe somehow to separate itself from itself. This epochal selection and sublimation of European culture is at the core of the very idea of transvaluation. It is a theme that gives rise to a whole host of peculiar oscillations and contradictions. Thus, Christianity is deemed to be a kind of Oriental illness, a symptom of slave revolt or untouchable morality polluting (alternatively) a Greek, Roman or Jewish European (or Western) matrix. We also see a drive for geographical exodus which translates a need to break with the decadent dialectic of 'European nihilism' and the political options (liberalism, socialism, nationalism, populism) it gives rise to. More interestingly, towards the end of his conscious life, Nietzsche increasingly tests out the possibility of the superiority of other civilisational lineages over against Europe. In his treatments of Islam, or Hinduism – all of which are explicitly anti-liberal, hierarchical and frequently misogynist – he considers the possibility that an affirmative culture might entirely separate itself from the Christian, Western heritage. As he writes in *The Anti-Christ*: 'Christianity cheated us out of the fruits of ancient culture, and later it cheated us a second time out of the fruits of *Islamic* culture. ... In itself, there really should not be any choice between Islam and Christianity, any more than between Arabs and Jews. The decision is given, no one is free to have any choice here. Either you *are* a Chandala or you are *not*... "War to the death against Rome! Peace, friendship with Islam!": this is what that great free spirit felt, thus us how he *acted*, the genius among German emperors, Friedrich II'.³⁸ Though this Islam may be purely 'semiotic',³⁹ a mere signifying foil and provocation, it does suggest two things: one, the fact that as Nietzsche's work advances any stable identity to the archi-political or philosophical concept of Europe, or indeed the West, is thrown into doubt; two, that the hierarchical invariants of his thinking remain determining in his evaluation of cultures – as he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the superiority of Islam stems from the fact that we are dealing with a world 'where man believes in order of rank and *not* in equality or equal rights'.⁴⁰

Despite the unsavoury reasons for this civilisational dislocation, it is nevertheless true that in its extreme consequences we could say, following the Italian philosopher Biagio de Giovanni, that Nietzsche's thought brings into crisis 'the self-representation of Europe',⁴¹ and

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38 Nietzsche 2005, pp. 63-4.

39 Almond 2003.

40 § 30, Nietzsche 1966, p. 42.

41 De Giovanni 2004.

with Losurdo, that Nietzsche strikes a blow against the *Christian* imperialism that in his epoch (let us recall that the Berlin Conference and the scramble of Africa under the threadbare cover of anti-slavery morality are contemporary with Nietzsche's major works) seeks to justify Europe's 'civilising mission'. More, Nietzsche's 'hammer' destroys the genealogical myth of Europe and the West, whether Christian-Aryan-Germanic or Hebrew-Christian-Greek-Occidental in its imaginary lineage. But the aim, consistently with Nietzsche's early work, is to destroy not just the hypocritical universalism that is harboured in such saccharine ideologies which cloak the fundamental brutality of imperialism, but to jettison universalism altogether – and, as some passages intimate, to empower imperialism and transvalue domination. To separate the excavation of the dark side of Christian and Occidental morality from the abiding drive to reinvent a hierarchy that remains 'European' is a supremely difficult alchemical operation.

In this respect, it is worth recalling, that a number of non-European anti-colonial intellectuals found in Nietzsche a tool for the total critique (to borrow Deleuze's important formulation) of what Immanuel Wallerstein has called 'European universalism', and for a recasting of that universalism and humanism on a planetary scale – embracing the *pars destruens* of Nietzsche's thought while judging his philosophy of the future incurably compromised by the residues of the colonial past.⁴² Edward Said's description of Fanon's relationship with Freud, Marx and Nietzsche in *Culture and Imperialism* can provide an initial indication of the uses of Nietzsche for total critiques of domination: 'In the subversive gestures of Fanon's writing is a highly conscious man deliberately as well as ironically repeating the tactics of the culture he believes oppressed him'. He treats his predecessors as 'of the West – the better to liberate their energies from the oppressing cultural matrix that produced them. By seeing them antithetically as intrinsic to the colonial system and at the same time potentially at war with it, Fanon performs an act of closure on the empire and announces a new era'.⁴³

The Birth of Tragedy Between the Commune and Decolonisation

By way of conclusion, I want to sketch the possibility of such an antithetical reading of Nietzsche's corpus, one that takes some of his inaugural texts on Greek tragedy as its starting point. In Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* we find both the traumatic trace of Nietzsche's fervent anti-socialism (and of the 'class racism' that undergirds it) and a cultural metaphysic that magnetised an important seam of anti-colonial thought

42 Wallerstein 2006. For a contrasting view, emphasising the anti-Nietzscheanism of anti-colonial intellectuals, see Brennan 2014, pp. 142-3.

43 Said 1993, pp. 268-9.

and practice.

As several commentators have explored, what is arguably the foremost poetic work of anti-colonialism, Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, was animated in part by the Martinican poet and politician's immersion into the early Nietzsche. Césaire himself, in a 1946 lecture delivered at an international philosophy conference on epistemology in Port-au-Prince, Haiti – entitled 'Poetry and Knowledge', and published in the Martinican journal he co-edited under Vichy occupation, *Tropiques* – would place his practice under the sign of the polarisation of the Dionysian and the Apollonian.⁴⁴ Césaire dates the 'revenge of Dionysus over Apollo' to 1850, and to Baudelaire's 'penetration of the universe', but the Nietzschean frame is unmistakable, not least in the poet's asseverations against the cold rationalism of the natural sciences and his invocations of the creative powers of tragic experience ('Fascination and terror. Trembling and wonder. Strangeness and intimacy'; 'a knotted primitive unity, the bedazzlement of which poets kept for themselves'). Particularly striking in this respect is Césaire's paean to poetic violence, channelling a certain Nietzschean rhetoric while turning for guidance to surrealism's dark beacon, Lautréamont:

In this climate of fire and fury that is the poetic climate, currencies lose their value, courts cease to make judgments, judges to sentence, juries to acquit. Only the firing squads still know what to do. The further one advances, the clearer the signs of breakdown become. Regulations choke; conventions are exhausted. The Grammont laws for the protection of men, the Locarno laws for the protection of animals abruptly and marvellously renounce their virtues. A cold wind of disarray blows.⁴⁵

This tragic register is faithful to Nietzsche in articulating a creative affirmation of destructive powers that is irreducible to a dialectical register. In this regard, as Donna V. Jones has perspicuously argued, Césaire's flight from any (anti-)colonial dialectic of recognition presages the staging of the tragic as an anti-dialectical affirmation of difference in the work of Deleuze and others. As she notes:

The Césaire of *Notebook* simply cannot be seen through the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic of recognition and labor, for he simply could not have found in slave labor the possibility of *Bildung*. Nor could he have believed that any master could confer, or was even interested in conferring, recognition on the slave. ... [The slave]

44 On the significance of the Dionysian/Apollonian distinction to the philosophy of négritude, in both Césaire and Léopold Senghor, see Diagne 2011 and 2018. See also Harcourt 2016.

45 Césaire 1996, p. 141.

simply does not care one whit about the recognition of the other (or the educative function of gang labor!). Here – and the irony cannot be lost – Nietzsche, an often crude exponent of eugenics, emboldened Césaire to rise above the need for confirmation, which can only imply conformation. Here are the roots of what is often perceived as the volcanic aggression of his poetics and the unapologetic call for violence in his student Fanon.⁴⁶

The turn to Nietzsche's conception of tragedy as a resource for an anti-colonial poetics – one that seeks to break the circle of a dialectic of liberation which in the final instance would always remain internal to the West – does not stop with Césaire. The Nigerian playwright and theorist Wole Soyinka draws even more extensively on the framework of *The Birth of Tragedy* to explore what he regards as the nexus between ritual loss of individuation and an aesthetic of communal immersion in African drama – one which will ultimately dislocate Nietzsche's own (Greco-German) conception of the tragic. Writing of the God Ogun in Yoruba tragedy, Soyinka describes how he 'surrender[s] his individuation once again ... to the fragmenting process; to be resorbed within universal Oneness, the Unconscious, the deep black whirlpool of mythopoietic forces'.⁴⁷ Tragic drama is thus incomprehensible without a cosmic orientation, without a 'communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger of chthonic realms'.⁴⁸ This Nietzschean inspiration is explicitly bound up in Soyinka with a rejection of historicism and an affirmation of an unabashedly metaphysical conception of the tragic, which shows 'man's recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories; and, of all subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as "tragedy" is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources'.⁴⁹

How are the anti-colonial and post-colonial uses of Nietzsche's metaphysics of tragedy affected by recovering the political content of the *Birth of Tragedy*? In the self-critical retrospect that accompanied the 1886 edition of the book (whose title replaced *Out of the Spirit of Music* with *Or Hellenism and Pessimism*), Nietzsche was forthright about the situation the book was responding to:

.....
⁴⁶ Jones 2010, p. 168. Césaire is himself not exempt from biologicistic temptations; he was 'led back at times against his own predispositions to an ahistoric naturalism of racial biologism and nomenclature racialism, not through a simple failure to break with racist culture but paradoxically through his very attempt to rise vigorously and vitally above the oppressive racial culture that he had inherited' (p. 174).

⁴⁷ Soyinka 2006, p. 153.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

Whatever underlies this questionable book, it must be a most stimulating and supremely important question and, furthermore, a profoundly personal one – as is attested by the times in which it was written, and in spite of which it was written, the turbulent period of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. While the thunder of the Battle of Wörth rolled across Europe, the brooder and lover of riddles who fathered the book was sitting in some corner of the Alps, utterly preoccupied with his ponderings and riddles and consequently very troubled and untroubled at one and the same time, writing down his thoughts about the Greeks – the core of this odd and rather inaccessible book to which this late preface (or postscript) is to be dedicated. A few weeks later he was himself beneath the walls of Metz and still obsessed with the question marks he had placed over the alleged 'cheerfulness' of the Greeks; until finally, in that extremely tense month when peace was being discussed at Versailles, he too made peace with himself and, whilst recovering slowly from an illness which he had brought back from the field, reached a settled and definitive view in his own mind of the 'Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music'...⁵⁰

The spirited montage no doubt hides the horrors experienced by a volunteer medical orderly on the frontlines, but it also cloaks a more specifically *political* trauma that accompanied the gestation of Nietzsche's first major work. In his critical intellectual biography and 'balance-sheet', Losurdo compellingly demonstrates the intimate link between Nietzsche's metapolitical figure of the tragic – the cultural-political project harboured by his inventive Greco-German synthesis – and his horrified *reaction* at the apocryphal news of the incineration of the Louvre at the hands of the insurrectionaries of the Paris Commune. In Losurdo's interpretation, the Commune, viewed through this stark juxtaposition between levelling plebeian violence and the summits of aesthetic creation, serves as a kind of negative event that indelibly marks the anti-revolutionary animus of Nietzsche's philosophy. In a letter of 21 June 1871 to his friend Carl von Gersdorff, Nietzsche writes:

When I heard of the fires in Paris, I felt for several days annihilated and was overwhelmed by fears and doubts; the entire scholarly, scientific, philosophical, and artistic existence seemed an absurdity, if a single day could wipe out the most glorious works of art, even whole periods of art; I clung with earnest conviction to the metaphysical value of art, which cannot exist for the sake of poor human beings but which has higher missions to fulfill.⁵¹

.....
⁵⁰ Nietzsche 1999, p. 3.

⁵¹ Nietzsche 1996b, p. 81. In another letter, he referred to the day when he came to hear of the Louvre's

Losurdo detects the obvious repercussions of this presence in an important passage from *The Birth of Tragedy*, which also speaks to the themes mined in the earlier parts of this paper, namely the relevance of the notion of 'class racism' to a critical valuation of Nietzsche's thought. The passage, tellingly, is one in which Nietzsche gives full vent to his polemic against the figure of Socrates, twinned here with Euripides, though not yet fused with the castigation of Christian morality which will define his mature philosophy:

We should not now disguise from ourselves what lies hidden in the womb of this Socratic culture: an optimism which imagines itself to be limitless! We should not now take fright when the fruits of this optimism ripen, when the acid of this kind of culture trickles down to the very lowest levels of our society so that it gradually begins to tremble from burgeoning surges and desires, when the belief in the earthly happiness of all, when the belief that such a general culture of knowledge is possible, gradually transforms itself into the menacing demand for such Alexandrian happiness on earth, into the invocation of a Euripidean *deus ex machina*! It should be noted that Alexandrian culture needs a slave-class in order to exist in the long term; as it views existence optimistically, however, it denies the necessity of such a class and is therefore heading towards horrifying extinction when the effects of its fine words of seduction and pacification, such as 'human dignity' and 'the dignity of labour', are exhausted. There is nothing more terrible than a class of barbaric slaves which has learned to regard its existence as an injustice and which sets out to take revenge, not just for itself but for all future generations.⁵²

As Losurdo comments, the *Birth* could have easily, and perhaps more aptly, carried the title or subtitle: *The Crisis of Civilisation from Socrates to the Paris Commune*.⁵³ The emphasis on discontinuity and difference that is elsewhere associated with Nietzsche's critique of historicist modes of thought, not least in the *Genealogy*, is absent here; in its place, we find a continuity so improbable (between Alexandrian culture under the sign of Socrates-Euripides and nineteenth-century revolution) as

destruction as the worst day of his life. Quoted in Ruehl 2004, p. 87 (who nicely terms the fantasised event an 'act of proletarian iconoclasm'). Nietzsche, like many of his contemporaries believed the 'fake news' about the destruction of the Louvre. While the Tuileries palace had been burnt down, the Louvre was unharmed. Losurdo skews the case in his favour for a seamless image of Nietzsche as a counter-revolutionary by not quoting the following lines from the letter: 'But even when the pain was at its worst, I could not cast a stone against those blasphemers, who were to me only carriers of the general guilt, which gives much food for thought' (ibid.). This does not gainsay the evident presence of an anti-plebeian and reactionary animus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, with Nietzsche willing himself to be far less magnanimous in print, and more resolutely donning the armour of the cultural warrior.

52 Nietzsche 1999, pp. 86-7.

53 Losurdo 1999, p. 11; Losurdo 2002, pp. 13-17.

to constitute a kind of counter-myth – a tale about the remote origins of decadence that will later be relayed, in terms of the same lexicon of domination, as the slave revolt in morality. Even more relevant perhaps for our purposes, is Nietzsche's claim, repeated *ad nauseam* in published and unpublished works alike, but stated here with exemplary clarity about the cruel presuppositions of morality, the violence at the heart of piety, the anti-human foundations of humanism. Walter Benjamin's much-quoted adage about there being no document of civilisation that was not simultaneously a document of barbarism is a *leitmotiv* of Nietzsche's thought, with the momentous difference that for Nietzsche this was something to be *affirmed*. Here, as José Emilio Esteban Enguita has persuasively argued⁵⁴ is the abiding core of Nietzsche's tragic politics, and the early source of his efforts to reinvent or transvalue aristocracy after the implosion of feudalism, the Ancien Régime and their threadbare moralities and metaphysics – efforts perhaps best encapsulated in the notion of a *pathos of distance*, the capstone of Nietzsche's thinking of hierarchy, rank and authority. As Nietzsche wrote in a fragment from 1870-1:

Art is the excessive and free force of a people that does not waste away in the struggle for existence. Here is demonstrated the *cruel* reality of a *culture*, to the extent that it erects its triumphal arcs over subjugation and annihilation.⁵⁵

That this conviction – which we could also formulate as the indissoluble if infinitely mutable nexus of slavery and culture, domination and genius, exploitation and vitality – did not prove such an obstacle to the refunctioning of *The Birth of Tragedy* for the sake of an anti-colonial poetics, is also a function of Nietzsche's own moves away, during the drafting of his first major work, from an explicitly political articulation of his recovery of the traduced origins of the tragic. In April 1870, when Nietzsche was still thinking of entitling his work-in-progress *Socrates and Instinct*, he envisaged a quadripartite structure, with four chapters respectively devoted to ethics, aesthetics, religion and mythology, and, last but not least, the theory of the state.⁵⁶ In autumn 1870, he was considering a different title: *Tragedy and Free Spirits: Considerations on the Ethico-Political Meaning of Musical Drama*. By the Spring of 1871, Nietzsche had reframed his project in a register far closer to its final shape – now entitled *Origins and Purpose of Tragedy. An Aesthetic Treatise. With a Preface to*

54 'La máscara política de Dioniso' [Dionysus's Political Mask], Introduction to Nietzsche 2004, pp. 9-50.

55 Nietzsche 2004, p. 61.

56 Ugolini 2007, p. 9.

Richard Wagner.⁵⁷ This subtraction of the political could lead us to qualify somewhat the starkness of Losurdo's thesis. That said, the text on the theory of the state that Nietzsche excised from his now aesthetic treatise and gifted to Cosima Wagner on Christmas 1872 as one of five prefaces for unwritten books is a powerful record of the political philosophy of hierarchy that the young Nietzsche felt he could extract from an anti-Socratic reading of Ancient Greek politics.⁵⁸ This 'politics of tragedy' is largely articulated around the thesis of the necessity of slavery – a thesis that at the end of his philosophical life, Nietzsche would repeatedly link to the requirement to invent new forms of domination, new orders of rank which, rather than looking nostalgically to ancient or feudal pasts, would assume the reality of democratic levelling and internationalisation as their battlefield. As Nietzsche declares in 'The Greek State':

we must learn to identify as a cruel-sounding truth the fact that slavery belongs to the essence of a culture: a truth, granted, that leaves open no doubt about the absolute value of existence. This truth is the vulture which gnaws at the liver of the Promethean promoter of culture. The misery of men living a life of toil has to be increased to make the production of the world of art possible for a small number of Olympian men.⁵⁹

The continuation of his argument is illuminated by the (false) fires of the Commune, inasmuch as the refusal to accept domination as the precondition of culture brings together all the strains of rationalist, progressive thought, while simultaneously insinuating the possibility that beyond acts of proletarian iconoclasm may spread out a far more devastating horizon, one in which compassion – which Nietzsche here seems to sympathetically inhabit *malgré lui* – could swamp creation:

Here we find the source of that hatred that has been nourished by the Communists and Socialists as well as their paler descendants, the white race of 'Liberals' of every age against the arts, but also

.....
⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 13-14. Ruehl 2004 suggests that the depoliticization of *The Birth* may have been at Wagner's insistence (p. 83), a product of the latter's idealisation of the ancient *polis* and humanist belief that slavery – what he also called 'the fateful hinge of world history' – was at the root of Athens' demise.

⁵⁸ On 'The Greek State', see Ruehl 2004, with its stress on the anti-democratic influence of Jacob Burckhardt and its fascinating discussion of the Prometheus-frontispiece to the first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* as an emblematic representation of Nietzsche's desire 'to liberate himself from his *Über*-father Wagner and the anti-capitalist, egalitarian ideas that the latter continued to embrace twenty-three years after the failed revolutions of 1848-1849'. Ruehl stresses that among the reasons for Nietzsche's increasing anti-socialist phobia was the restive character of the working classes in Basel itself, which only four months after his inaugural lecture as a professor of philology had hosted the Fourth Congress of the International Working Men's Association, with the presence of Wagner's old comrade from the Dresden uprising of 1849, Mikhail Bakunin.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche 2006, p. 166.

against classical antiquity. If culture were really left to the discretion of a people, if inescapable powers, which are law and restraint to the individual, did not rule, then the glorification of spiritual poverty and the iconoclastic destruction of the claims of art would be more than the revolt of the oppressed masses against drone-like individuals: it would be the cry of compassion tearing down the walls of culture; the urge for justice, for equal sharing of the pain, would swamp all other ideas.⁶⁰

And, in painting his crowning image of the tragic (anti-)dialectic of cruelty and culture, Nietzsche also suggests – in an intuition that would return repeatedly in later works – how what distinguishes the present is the incapacity (which could also be interpreted as bad faith or hypocrisy) to *assume* the cruelty, domination and hierarchy required for the establishment of any social and cultural order of valuation – including one that imagines itself to be moral, or humanist. What's more, behind the castigation of sensitivity is an emphasis on the inability of the present to rise to the level of tragic *pathos*, and thus to wed a theory of culture to a theory of the state. Given how relatively neglected this remarkable encapsulation of Nietzsche's early politics of tragedy has been, it is worth quoting it at some length:

[W]e may compare the magnificent culture to a victor dripping with blood, who, in his triumphal procession, drags the vanquished along, chained to his carriage as slaves: the latter having been blinded by a charitable power so that, almost crushed by the wheels of the chariot, they still shout, 'dignity of work!', 'dignity of man!' Culture, the voluptuous Cleopatra, still continues to throw the most priceless pearls into her golden goblet: these pearls are the tears of compassion for the slave and the misery of slavery. The enormous social problems of today are engendered by the excessive sensitivity of modern man, not by true and deep pity for that misery; and even if it were true that the Greeks were ruined because they kept slaves, the opposite is even more certain, that we will be destroyed by the *lack* of slavery ... Whoever is unable to think about the configuration of society without melancholy, whoever has learnt to think of it as the continuing, painful birth of those exalted men of culture in whose service everything else has to consume itself, will no longer be deceived by that false gloss the moderns have spread over the origin and meaning of the state. For what can the state mean to us, if not the means of setting the previously described process of society in motion and guaranteeing its unobstructed continuation?⁶¹

.....
⁶⁰ Nietzsche 2006, pp. 166-7.

⁶¹ Nietzsche 2006, pp. 167-8.

It is likely that the integration of 'The Greek State' into *The Birth of Tragedy* would have made the anti-colonial translation of Nietzsche's tragic metaphysics and poetics, by Césaire and others, far more arduous. And yet we could also think of that delinking of tragedy and hierarchy – a delinking that made it possible to transcode *The Birth* in an anti-Eurocentric register – as the invention of a possibility that was latent in some of Nietzsche's early investigations into the musical dramas of the Ancient Greeks, namely that of collective cultural forms that would undermine the forms of individuality and subjectivity, *but also of domination*, coterminous with the European 'civilising project'.

In his Basel courses of 1869-70, Nietzsche repeatedly stressed the collective, mass mysticism lying at the heart of Greek tragedy; tragic action is subordinated to the lyrical and pathetic lament of the chorus. The widely disputed idea of an emergence of tragedy from the cult of Dionysus, in the dissolution of individuation within a cosmic order, the initiation to transcendence through extreme fright, is here bound to the fusional-democratic character of the Dionysian games, which Nietzsche calls 'a great festival of freedom and equality in which the servile classes recovered their original right'.⁶² Tragedy draws on 'popular mass poetry' which the dithyramb masters.⁶³ As the young Nietzsche declared: 'The dithyramb is a popular chant, even one principally issuing from the lower classes. Tragedy has always conserved a democratic character; just as it was born from the people'.⁶⁴ Contrariwise, modern tragedy is modelled after the law court and was never really able to recover its popular base, which is a precondition of the truly tragic. Before the trauma of the commune, Nietzsche can thus be seen to have briefly articulated an image of tragedy that strangely foreshadows the anti-colonial reinvention of the tragic in the fires of decolonisation.⁶⁵

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62 Nietzsche 1994, p. 37.

63 Ibid., p. 40.

64 Ibid., p. 43

65 On tragedy and decolonisation, see Scott 2014 and Glick 2016.

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Nietzsche coined the term tragic age, and he left behind innumerable suggestions, which are really just provocations, about extending the moniker from ancient Greece to modern Europe. In a word, with Nietzsche tragedy became a powerful label, one that could be applied to cultures, mentalities, historical moments, and sweeping historical patterns. Tragedy likewise came to be applied to aspects of Nietzsche's own intellectual achievements, and at times to the coherence and tenor of his thinking as a whole. But by the same token, because Nietzsche's thought was as suggestive and provocative as it was, in his wake the very idea of tragedy became something of a challenge and a puzzle. Malik writes: "The sense of racial superiority that European elite classes felt over the non-European society cannot be understood outside of the sense of the inferiority imposed upon the masses at home...." We have already drawn attention to Nietzsche's treatment of the Greek philosopher Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In the manner of Gobineau, Nietzsche then goes on to incorporate the struggle against socialism and the commune—the socialists of Europe, does not signify in the main a tremendous counterattack—and that the conqueror and master race, the Aryan, is not succumbing physiologically, too? The *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's first book, was published in 1872, when he was 28 years old and a professor of classical philology at Basel. The book had its defenders but, in general, provoked a hostile reception in the academic community and affected Nietzsche's university career for the worse. While the thunderclap of the Battle of Wörth was reverberating across Europe, the meditative lover of enigmas whose lot it was to father this book sat somewhere in a corner of the Alps, extremely reflective and perplexed, thus simultaneously very distressed and carefree, and wrote down his thoughts about the Greeks—the kernel of that odd and difficult book to which this later. The Greeks and the music of tragedy? The Greeks and the art work of pessimism? "Race, Class, Tragedy. Nietzsche and the Fantasies of Europe," *Crisis and Critique*, Volume 7, Issue 1, 13 January 2020 (The Future of Europe). Warren, Mark. Nietzsche and Political Thought. *Essays on Nietzsche, Race, Class, Inequality & Fascism*. Aronowitz, Stanley. "Georg Lukács's Destruction of Reason," in *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*; edited by Michael J. Thompson (London; New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 50-64.