



After Nietzsche's Beyond

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Abstract

Nietzsche's writing on nationalism raises a series of questions about how we interpret his genealogical and constructivist insights in light of his often mendacious cultural stereotyping. More importantly, the misinterpretations of his work in the name of nationalism have required careful examination to 'salvage' his work from the wreckage of his posthumous Nazi career. A close reading of Nietzsche raises critical questions about modern political subjectivity. This piece relates these questions to the methodological problem associated with studying nationalist violence in the wake of Nietzsche's academic revival. It argues that Nietzsche's desire to place his own subjectivity beyond the dilemmas of his day is ethically incomplete. If we only understand oppression in terms of different subject positions or personal subjectivity, then we fail to recognize the ethical responsibility that inter-subjectivity makes possible through the act of bearing witness to the oppression experienced by others.

Nietzsche wrote a lot about power but he was not much of a political theorist, at least not in the formal sense. Yet everything he wrote about touches on what we today think of as 'the political': religion, morality, and social philosophy. That we recognize him today as important to social theory does not stem from any formal philosophical construct but rather from his willingness to engage in the back and forth of thinking through the problems facing the modern subject. He faced a world of enormous uncertainties and tried desperately to understand himself by



writing incisive critiques that often read at cross-purposes to each other. Yet his attempt to move back and forth between places, friends, identities, and in and out of social conventions appeared falsely to some as providing absolutes and fixity. This partly explains how Nietzsche, a critic of German nationalism, was resuscitated as a prophet of National Socialism, a posthumous career requiring decades of careful rehabilitation. Perhaps we can now appreciate the moments in which his insightful critique outpaced his times, and much of the last century, too. The enormous energy and passion that have gone into re-reading Nietzsche is indeed an important part of Europe's post-war intellectual reconstruction, just as bearing witness and building an ever closer union have been to healing the lines that divided it. It is all the more striking to me, as someone who has studied Europe's latter-day genocides in the former Yugoslavia, that Nietzsche's rehabilitation has often set aside the uncomfortable questions – or rather questions of our discomfort – about his writings on nations and the meaning of 'good Europeans,' a persistent theme in Nietzsche's writings that beckons to a post-national subjectivity and (some interpretations of) European integration (Emden, 2008).

What justifies his second life in the seminar room and fashionable journals is that Nietzsche remains a pressing and discomfiting presence in our confrontation with political violence. Nietzsche is important not for the questionable politics he was thought to serve but for his questioning the political in modern life. I have frequently thought about his comments on nationalism since my first trip to Bosnia-Herzegovina nine years ago. My confrontation with nationalism raised complex and difficult ethical questions for me, however much I might have thought, or rather wished, that nationalism was a 'thing of the past.' Nietzsche, too, recognized its troubling presence in modern life. In his work *Beyond Good and Evil* (2000 [1886], § 241), Nietzsche argued that it is nationalism's own interest in strength and mastery that nevertheless leads a nation into subservience to another: "how soon one stronger will become master over the strong; also that for the spiritual flattening of a people there is a compensation, namely the deepening of another people." Yet, however critical Nietzsche is of nationalism, his own claim to 'reason' still works through the categories of 'peoples' and races: "I could imagine that even within our quick-moving Europe, some dull, sluggish races might need half-centuries to overcome these atavistic attacks of fatherland-ism and attachment to the soil, and return to reason, that is to say, to being 'good Europeans'" (Nietzsche, 2000 [1886], § 241). Nietzsche's desire to transcend national categories surrenders their meaning to the nationalists because he imagines a 'good European' is beyond bias and unreason.



Figure 1. The mass grave at Crni Vrh was reopened in 2003, eight years after the war.

One is struck by the resemblance between Nietzsche's passivity to the problem of nationalism in his time and the West's passivity to the wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In effect, they both see nationalism as a political problem that is overcome as nations develop/evolve sufficiently to join a new Europe. This leitmotif is heard again in Nietzsche's notion of political progress, of "a tremendous physiological process" that yields an "evolving European" (Nietzsche, 2000 [1886], § 242). This creative destruction of subject positions clashes with the Foucauldian ethic of care and the recognition of nationalism as a biopolitical construct. In short, we are left with the sense that Nietzsche's attempt to move beyond nationalist politics was really a movement back and forth within a biopolitical definition of modern subjects that merely discarded one deadly politics for another.

I thought of Nietzsche again while visiting the hollow crater of a mass grave in eastern Bosnia (Figure 1). The grave had contained some of the missing from the area where my collaborator and I were studying the aftermath of the Bosnian war (Ó Tuathail and Dahlman, forthcoming). Located on the side of a mountain named "Dark Peak," it was, at the time, the largest mass grave opened in Bosnia. There had been an accounting of what was found in the grave: 483 mostly complete bodies, another 150 partial remains, 198 smaller body parts, and 122

artifacts. These had all been taken away for identification and proper burial, leaving behind a gaping hole. It lay half full of water like an inverted tumulus, an ignominious grave reflecting gray sky above. The yellow muck around the edge of the pit pulled at my shoes and gave off a foul smell. After a few minutes of rather unintentional meditation, perhaps shock, I was surprised to find myself thinking about the abyss, about the new Europeans, about peoples and fatherlands. Later, I felt disappointed at finding in that place an unreconstructed apparition of Nietzsche's questionable politics rather than God, pain, or something more directly meaningful.

It was only later, upon seeing the victims' remains in the morgue, that my ambivalent reaction to that morbid aerie began to turn into thoughts about the responsibility to bear witness, to call out the guilty. It was a relief to think "no, Nietzsche doesn't apply here... he got it wrong. One doesn't have to remain passive in the face of horror." Yet I remain(ed) disturbed at my unexpected encounter with Nietzsche and returned to *Beyond Good and Evil* (2000 [1886]) to see what useful disruptions I might have missed in my earlier reading.

In chapter eight, "Peoples and Fatherlands," Nietzsche presents us with a discussion of problems that, one hundred years later, still apply to the conflict in Bosnia and the strange disjuncture between nationalist violence and the apparent progress of a unified Europe. Nietzsche writes about Europe's preoccupation with nation, a mania that he shares if only to try and best it. In expressing his skepticism of German nationalism, Nietzsche moves back and forth between the category of nationhood as a constructed thing and a biological presumption. He says, "The German soul is above all manifold, of diverse origins, more put together and superimposed than actually built" (Nietzsche 2000 [1886], § 244). This momentary glimpse of a socially constructed nationhood then disappears when he explains *how* it was "put together." Nietzsche writes that this manifold quality is "due to where it comes from... As a people of the most monstrous mixture and medley of races, perhaps even with a preponderance of the pre-Aryan element, as 'people of the middle' in every sense, the Germans are more incomprehensible, comprehensive, contradictory, unknown, incalculable, surprising, even frightening than other people are to themselves" (Nietzsche, 2000 [1886], § 244). What seemed at first insightful about nation gives way to Nietzsche's greater tendency to write poisoned pen letters to the culture he wished to estrange.

This back and forth from a critical position by which we might obliterate nation – and move ourselves beyond good and evil – appears again in the same chapter but with less ambiguity about Nietzsche's assumptions: "What is called a 'nation' in Europe today, and is really rather a *res facta* than a *res nata* (and occasionally can hardly be told from a *res ficta et picta*) is in any case something

evolving, young, and easily changed..." (Nietzsche 2000 [1886], § 251).² These critical moments lay bare "nation" as something with a genealogy, something fashioned. But that same passage gives way to something less critical, more uncomfortable, and ultimately disappointing as Nietzsche concludes that nation is "...easily changed, not yet a race, let alone such an *aere perennius* as the Jewish type."³ Nation may be constructed, but other identities are not. Nietzsche is as comfortable denouncing caterwauling Germanophiles as he is trading in the currency of eternal racial and cultural typologies. We must be vigilant of his mendacious indulgence of national and racial caricatures. At the same time, a recognition of Nietzsche as a thinker working through his situation rather than transcending it might provide a more critical position on identity that calls into question not only his but also our passivity to nationalism, and the elusive hope for 'good subjects,' European or otherwise.

The post-war rehabilitation of Nietzsche, and his role in thinking about modern subjectivity, has produced critical moments that bring us back to the subject(s) of political violence. The moments beside the grave and in the morgue were alienating – estranging and silencing – because it is an encounter with an extreme form of difference. The violence that the war's victims experienced was part of a specific historical and social context that we cannot re-occupy or know – we cannot move back and forth between subjects, *per se*. Kelly Oliver (2001) argues that this impossible relation between subject positions is a major challenge to overcoming the violence associated with nationalism and other forms of violence. Seeking to recognize the subjects of oppression, in this case war's victims, fails because we are listening for an impossible testimony. Certainly, there are eyewitnesses who survived, as well as the perpetrators themselves, but even their testimonies and confessions are from different positions and reshaped by their retelling (Cubilié, 2005). Oliver works with yet moves beyond Nietzsche, as well as other thinkers, by suggesting that this difference in subject positions need not give way to passivity. She argues that we must instead recognize oppression and victimization through our shared subjectivities and our infinite capacity to make meaning in the presence of difference, despite different subject positions. However different our subject positions, our subjectivity allows us to carry responsibility for witnessing oppression not by representing historical facts, *per se*, but by bearing witness to the "truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts" (Oliver, 2004, 81).

Witnessing, then, is an act not only of eyewitness testimony or our recognition of the oppression of others, but an open encounter with their otherness, a fundamentally ethical responsibility of the encounter. It is a back and forth

² The Latin translates as "is really rather a thing man-made than a thing born (and occasionally can hardly be told from a thing invented and painted)."

³ "*Aere perennius*" translates as "more lasting than bronze."

movement that does not wait passively but rather allows us to move beyond subject positions. Nietzsche was unable to do this because he did not recognize subjectivity as having an ethical component towards the other, and so he became self-referential. In contrast, witnessing is an obligation to recognize ourselves as active agents in the re-presentation of oppression that results from a tension between impossibly different subject positions and the possibility of bearing witness. Oliver draws from psychoanalytic and phenomenological theory to create a parallel between the encounter with the other and our encounter with ourselves. Indeed, when we gaze into the abyss, it gazes back into us – to seek is to bear out. This reflective understanding of subjectivity seeks to move beyond a theoretical grammar that recognizes only either sameness or difference, and to bear out an ethical obligation to the other by opening ourselves to a shared humanity. Bearing witness, then, is an ethical responsibility to make meaning that, in Oliver's Nietzschean phrasing, "moves us beyond the melancholic choice between either dead historical facts or traumatic repetition of violence" (Oliver 2004, 81). Recognizing our own subjectivity in the work of bearing witness to oppression thus exposes our own subject positions in ways that are discomfiting, but productively so if we are to responsibly make meaning after oppression.

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