

Nietzsche, Europe and the German question

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The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is best known for his critical texts on religion and morality, but how did he view Europe? **Simon Glendinning** notes that Nietzsche's thought consistently exhibited a distinctively European orientation, with a conception of his own work as belonging to a European context, and not simply a German one or a more universal and global one. He writes that Nietzsche's reflections on Europe provide insights into the nature of Germany – the so called 'German question' – as well as raising questions about what it means to be 'European'.

Nietzsche is a German philosopher best known for his radical critique of Europe's historical (and especially Christian) morality of "good and evil". However, it is less well known that his efforts to go "beyond" the Europe of those values is still made *in the name of Europe*, and specifically with reference to the coming of a new "supra-national and nomadic type of man" that he calls "good Europeans" (154). These Europeans will have achieved independence of any "definite milieu" (153), and belong to a Europe that "wants to become one" (169). In what follows I want briefly to raise the question why Nietzsche retains this stress on Europe. Why does Nietzsche speak of "we Europeans", and not simply, say, "we whoevers"?

One might want to excuse Nietzsche by referring to the "context" of his times: the world was not so big then, the horizon for his thinking was European because his world was. But that is nonsense. Nietzsche's work is peppered with non-European references, and often, typically even, with great admiration. Nevertheless, while he asks "What Europe owes to the Jews?" (161), he does not stop to ask "What Europe owes the non-European in general?", nor even just the non-European migrants into Europe.

Nietzsche certainly thinks that Europe has been a site of "great things" in the past – but he does not think that Europe has a monopoly on that at all: Asia and Egypt are mentioned in the same breath (13). So why the limit to thinking the new cosmopolitan "plant 'man'" (54) of the future to the indefinite but definitively European *milieu*? Is it white racism? Eurocentric parochialism? Modest pragmatism? My suspicion is that it is none of those. It is...German.

The German question ("What is Germany?") casts a profoundly determining shadow over Nietzsche's reflections on Europe. I do not regard this as a Nietzschean idiosyncrasy. On the contrary, it is my contention that when Germany thinks *itself* it has always thought itself in an essentially *European* horizon, a European horizon that *it* "invents" and projects as the context of its own spiritual destiny. Of course, Germany will not have been alone in this, nor even the first to do so. Indeed, no European people has ever been able entirely to do otherwise: there is an "agon" of (mostly national) projections internal to Europe's "identity". Nevertheless, there is, I think, a peculiar intimacy between the German question and the European question, or at least a distinctive shaping of both in that relation.



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When we think of the Germany/Europe relation, we tend still to foreground the expansionary ambitions of German

National Socialism. But with the invitation to think of Europe as a German projection, I do not mean to imply that we must always be on our guard against what [Habermas](#) has called a “fatal” temptation for Germany to “succumb to power fantasies” of achieving “semi-hegemonic status” in Europe. No, the European horizon that interests me is just as visible in Habermas’s call for Germany finally to *give up* those fantasies as some kind of repentance for its indulging them.

Habermas may make a more welcome gesture when he says “that it is in our [German] national interest to permanently avoid” those temptations, since not doing so leads only to “catastrophe”. But it is still the same programme: German interests and German destiny are still conceived as inseparably connected to a *particular* European future. Not only that it will *have* one, but that its having one is critically bound up with the realisation, led by Germany, of a *political union* among its peoples.

Habermas’s call for rapid steps to be taken towards the formation of a “supranational democracy” at the European level, and the crossing of “the red line of the classical understanding of sovereignty” that this would entail, is fully part of this German story, as his insistence that “the German government holds the key to the fate of the European Union in its hand”. These intertwined fates and fatalities belong, I think, internally to “the German question”, making of it at once entangled with what Habermas himself calls “the European question”.

Habermas is keen that Germany’s ties to Europe will both strengthen the latter and hold steady the former. This is a common theme in post-War Germany, alive as it is to the anxiety that Germany might once more, as Habermas puts it, try to create a “German Europe” instead of a “Germany *in* Europe”. This distinction between the Germanisation of Europe and the Europeanisation of Germany might seem to allow for a quelling of these anxieties. Indeed, we have tended to welcome the second and fear the first. However, it may be a distinction without much of a difference, especially if the Europeanisation in view is already something of a German projection.

Even in political terms it may not always be a significant contrast. The fearful version, which Nietzsche explicitly affirms (156), can amount to almost the same thing as the welcome one, precisely by its *stemming* German nationalist tendencies within a finally united Europe. And the welcome version, which Habermas affirms, can amount to the same thing as the fearful one, when Germany “holds the key” to the success of the EU on a plan of its own.

“Europe” may be something of a German thing. But as I say it is not only a German thing. Not only has it never long remained an uncontested German thing – other *becoming-Europeans* will have their own ideas – but as the French philosopher Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe has stressed, the German way of styling “Europe as a whole” is something whose development was “essentially induced by the French one” (79). There is a fascinating tête-à-tête here, what Lacoue-Labarthe calls “a mimetic rivalry”, that is played out in relation to the question of “the imitation of the Ancients” (90).

With both players conceiving Greek antiquity as the point of origin of a movement of world history which unfolds into Europe’s modernity, Lacoue-Labarthe identifies two distinctive models of self-identification, French and German respectively, that are forged through the appropriation of that heritage, *and through that the future of Europe*. France, on the one hand, returns to Greece through “Latinity”: the Roman and Renaissance imitation. The Germanic world, on the other hand, “situated beyond the *limes*” of Latinity, is faced with the choice “to be either the anti-Roman power of Europe or not to be” (91). Germany finds its identity in this struggle over the appropriation of the Greeks, aspiring to create *itself* thereby as the “the creator of a *Europe* that will be more than a Roman colony” – and to do so through the inheritance of “an altogether different Greece” (91).

This other imitation finds its decisive expression in [Winckelmann](#)’s famous invocation to the Germans to imitate the Ancients “in order to make ourselves inimitable in turn” (90). In this “*Kulturkampf*” with French neo-classicism and republicanism (Greek-Roman-Christian-revolutionary), it became necessary for Germany “to ‘invent’ a Greece which had up to that point remained unimitated... which would allegedly be at the foundation of Greece itself... What the German imitation is seeking in Greece is the model – and therefore the possibility – of a pure emergence, of a

pure originality: a model of self-formation.” (79)

One might begin to summarise all of this by recalling the Delphic Oracle’s reply to Zeno: “Take on the colour of the dead” – which Zeno interpreted as “study the ancients”; repeat them. And then we have two models: either the Latin model, which is *do what they did* in the sense of becoming *like* them in your ways (paidea/humanitas), or the German model, which is *do what they did* in the sense of becoming yourself in *your own* ways (autochthonous).

In a recent discussion of the German sword-in-the-tree called “Nothung” that cuts through Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, Stephen Mulhall invites us to follow something of Nietzsche’s claim to see “the Wagnerian representation of Wotan’s overthrow...as itself the refounding of a new, non-Christian [ie. non-Latin] culture that might run counter to the philistinism of contemporary *Germany* by reconnecting *Europe* to its sources in Greek culture” (22, my stress). Mulhall speaks here about Germany/Europe and its genealogy not in geopolitical terms but geophilosophical terms: *through its Greek origin*.

Germany, attaining itself in this appropriative way – through the authentic repetition of the inimitable rather than the mere imitation of the classics – would enable Europe too to attain to “the innermost course of its history” which, as Heidegger will insist, was “originally ‘philosophical’” (31). Again, in the mimetic rivalry played out in this Franco-German duet it barely makes a difference whether the German “key” is sounded through an affirmation of the Germanisation of Europe (though a union that would overturn Latinity) or the Europeanisation of Germany (through the authentic repetition of the originary, non-Latin, source of Europe).

Only it is not a duet. Geophilosophically speaking there is an invariable, if sometimes set aside, third hand in this drama of the modern political in the form of that most semi-detached of European states: Britain (or rather what Nietzsche, like most who recall it, calls “England”). Always on the verge of some kind of European Brexit, always ready to oppose itself to a “Continental Europe” that is itself (primarily) the divided German/French Europe, Britain too will have its say.

I cited Stephen Mulhall’s remarks on the sword-in-the-tree called “Nothung” a moment ago in part to help prepare get this into view: for he goes on to note that the British Arthurian legend embodied in the (not actually the) sword-in-the-stone called “Excalibur” represents a myth of British national identity “that is historically constructed (and repeatedly reconstructed) in opposition to the very aspects of Northern European culture...with which [Wagner] proposes to reconstruct *German* life and values” (22) – and hence, we might now say, with which he proposes to reconstruct *European* life and values.

In this light it is tempting to imagine an exemplary Britain in the “mimetic rivalry” we have been following here. Unlike Germany, Britain had been thoroughly Romanised. But there was a decisive *break* with Rome. And it came (not with a religious revolution but) with the demand of an English King not to be dictated to by a Pope. (He wanted a divorce.) One might wonder if the modern “English” model of liberty as a political concept has its own corresponding and commendable form: not as “sovereignty” and not as a fantasy of “autochthony” either, but, perhaps, as “*non-domination*”. With respect to the mimetic *agon* this would also imply a third way: that one can learn from the ancients – or indeed other moderns – but without thereby feeling oneself obliged to imitate them.

Britain has never been wholly cut off from (what it calls) the Continent, nor always omitted in considerations of European life and values. It remains the case, however, that philosophical investigations of modern Europe have often exhibited a rather binary aspect: it is fundamentally a French and German battle over who will be (or will have been) the “creator of a Europe” (91).

Nietzsche is a notable exception here: his own “experimental synthesis” of the “European of the future” (170) is more or less entirely drawn from the Germano-Franco-Britannic trio (although with a significant debt to the Jews). Perhaps most surprisingly of all, Nietzsche even gives (admittedly an only temporary) *priority* to “England” as the “spirit” that should dominate in the initial movements towards this new European creation. Despite what he regards as the “mediocrity” and “averageness” of English thinkers, he affirms as undeniable that “it is useful for *such* spirits

to dominate for a while”. Brexit or not (and I confess I hope *not*) – Britain’s referendum decision will also be a European event.

Returning, however, to my opening question of Nietzsche’s insistently European horizon, we should recognise that even if Nietzsche’s experimental synthesis of the new supra-national nomad turns out to be (largely) Germano-Franco-British and not just Germano-French this still does not explain why it should be called *European*. Or at least it leaves it open that it might be European only in the most trivial sense: that it comprises a synthesis of already-identified-as-European attributes. But that simply raises the question of what it is that makes them one and all European. Is it geography and geopolitics?

Nietzsche’s thought invites us to look deeper, and to conceive geographical and geopolitical questions of Europe’s modern identity as unfolding within a more fundamental *agon* over modern Europe’s “spiritual” configuration, within a dimension that is *fundamentally* geophilosophical. That being said, however, Nietzsche does not just offer a thought of “spiritual” Europe. No, his is a distinctive projection of a “*one Europe*” to come (170), a Europe that will be dominated by “a single will” (119). As such his thought is not “purely” philosophical. There is something else there too.

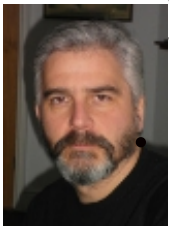
To conclude this little interlude on Nietzsche and the German question, if we ask why Nietzsche is so interested in Europe and its future political union, why he is the thinker of “we good *Europeans*” and not, say, “we good *whoevers*”, we can simply say: because, first of all, and in anything but a petty nationalistic sense, Nietzsche is a German philosopher.

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