

Debate: Reworking the Democratic Imagination

WILLIAM E. CONNOLLY

Political Science, Johns Hopkins University

I. THE DEMOCRATIC PROJECT

Over the last ten years or so I have tried to rethink several classical, interconnected elements in the democratic imagination: the relation of cultural identities to the differences through which they are constituted; the practice of pluralism most appropriate to a democratic culture when the variety of cultural constituencies dispersed across the same territory is large; the ethical relation a constituency might bear to the moral source it honors the most in a culture where several such sources compete for attention; and the role that cultivation of “agonistic respect” and “critical responsiveness” might play in sustaining a democratic ethos when diversity has become extensive and when, as I call it, the politics of becoming proceeds more rapidly than heretofore. The idea is to rework the democratic imagination by adjusting it to two key characteristics of the late-modern time: the globalization of economic life amidst retention of the state as the highest tribunal of democratic accountability and the acceleration of speed in so many domains of life including cultural communications, social movements, population migration, military mobility and disease transmission.

I sometimes draw upon a non-democrat, Nietzsche, to prompt and inspire me in this task, listening as well to democratic thinkers (in the largest sense) such as Foucault, Arendt and Deleuze who have themselves *already* entered into a relation of agonistic indebtedness to Nietzsche. Mark Redhead steps into this enterprise to bring the word that my reading of Nietzsche is faulty. Redhead seeks to save Nietzsche from Connolly and, it appears, to save democracy from both of us. I am, he says, one of several Americans who turns a blind eye toward “will to power” as domination; who pulls “the pathos of distance” and “the spiritualization of enmity” out of the social hierarchy in which they are set; and who supports the reduction of economic inequality while barely noticing how strongly Nietzsche prizes inequality. If I concurred in Redhead’s one-dimensional reading of Nietzsche (or of Connolly, for that matter) it would surely be necessary to look elsewhere for help in reworking the democratic imagination. What concerns me about Redhead’s account, though, is that even as it presents the Truth about Nietzsche it erases the question of *whether it is imperative to rework the democratic imagination in the contemporary age*. Indeed, Redhead’s formulaic reading of Nietzsche is precisely the type you would expect from someone who either thinks liberal democracy is fine as it stands, or who yearns for the day when an aristocratic politics might reassert

itself, or both in some uncertain combination. Because I resist these options my comments return the question of democracy to its critical place.

Two theses: First, Nietzsche is no democrat. Indeed he advances a virulent critique of the Rousseauian vision of “nursemaid” democracy, a critique that supporters of the democratic vision I endorse must address. Second, classical democratic theory, as it entered the modern western world via Rousseau, Tocqueville and even J. S. Mill, is poorly attuned to the two constitutive features of our age mentioned already: the globalization of economic life and the acceleration of tempo. I seek to fashion, in collaboration with others, a post-Nietzschean conception of democracy in the space between those two theses.

What is most deficient in the early-modern democratic imagination? Its images of cultural unity organized around such themes as the people, the nation, the common good, and the general will are too restrictive in the diversity they enable; therefore, they are not reflective enough about the task of promoting democratic action in concert out of diversity. Moreover, such models obscure *the politics of becoming*, that uncertain and paradoxical process by which new identities are propelled into the world out of old injuries, differences and energies. They depreciate the ethical pressure placed upon existing codes of morality and justice by new movements in the politics of becoming. Rousseau ushers in the modern democratic spirituality under the stars of the general will and, in his *Essay on Poland*, the nation. Tocqueville appears to loosen these drives. But in *Democracy in America*, Christianity first forms the essential trunk of democratic civilization itself and then a few stubby limbs of diversity are allowed to branch out from that trunk. This arboreal model of democratic pluralism, which Tocqueville both registers and endorses, engenders a series of cruel exclusions. And it treats these exclusions as if they were necessary to the fabric of democratic civilization itself rather than effects of one contestable image of democracy. These cruelties can be represented by the Tocquevillian exclusion of the (non-Christian) Indian from democratic civilization and his radical marginalization of the atheist in public life. The arboreal model of democratic pluralism can be filled out in different ways. Its trunk might be formed by Christianity, or by a secularized conception of “persons” as the paradigmatic bearers of rights and justice, or by treating the regular individual as the standard according to which all people are to be assessed, and so on. But relentless pursuit of the arboreal model, already wreaking great suffering in the nineteenth century, can today only issue in the fundamentalization of democracy. Hence the active invocation of Tocqueville in the United States by those commanders of cultural war such as Newt Gingrich and William Bennett who seek to “return” America to a unity it never entirely had.¹

¹I discuss William Bennett’s prosecution of cultural war in “Drugs, the Nation and Free Lancing: Decoding the Moral Universe of William Bennett,” *Theory and Event* (Vol. 1, Issue 1, January, 1996). *Theory and Event* is a new electronic journal of political thought, which is thereby available internationally immediately upon publication: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_&_event/>

Even John Stuart Mill, the democratic individualist, remains dazzled in *On Representative Government* by the image of democracy as a highly centered nation. He tends to imagine each territory in the world as if it were populated by a unified “people.” And in those few instances, such as in Eastern Europe, where he recognizes that this is not the case, his conception of democratic civilization is thrown into turmoil. Still, set against these dominant tendencies in Mill are more promising drives. He shows some appreciation for a more rhizomatic or network model of democracy in which multiple minorities on the same territory draw upon diverse moral sources to establish an *ethos of engagement* between themselves without any single constituency presenting itself as the embodiment of the essence of the democratic nation.² And he shows limited respect for a democratic ethos in which the politics of becoming is accepted as a *critical and permanent component of democratic life*.³

Several contemporary images of democracy participate in the general problematics elaborated by Rousseau, Tocqueville and Mill, depreciating the network model of democracy in favor of an arboreal or national model and giving too much priority to the community, the nation, the regular individual, shared understandings and settled rules in the practice of justice over the ethos needed to respond thoughtfully to the politics of becoming. Communitarian, individualist, proceduralist and national theories of democracy tend to degrade the network model of diversity, the politics of becoming, or both. In doing so under contemporary conditions of speed and globalization they inadvertently foster the fundamentalization of democracy.

II. THE NIETZSCHEAN MOMENT

If you draw upon Nietzsche to help rework the democratic imagination it is probably wise to bracket his most grandiose themes until you have had a chance to listen closely to formulations closer to the ground. For themes such as “will to power,” “nihilism,” and even “eternal return” function as lightning rods in contemporary discourse. Indeed, it is pertinent to recall here that Nietzsche emphasizes how each reading of his texts is shaped by the *sensibility* the reader brings to it as well as the materials presented to the reader. That is why Nietzsche tries to work on the sensibilities through which his texts are read even as he offers them for reception. Thus the definition you give of “will to power” may reveal as

²“A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes . . . A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles . . . We’re tired of trees. They’ve made us suffer too much . . .” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 6–7, 15.

³The interpretations advanced in this paragraph are developed more extensively in *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), particularly chs 5 and 6; and in “The Liberal Image of the Nation,” a paper about Mill and the nation to be presented in August 1997 at the conference on “Nationalism and Indigenous Peoples” at the Australian National University.

much about how adequate you find existing conceptions of identity, ethics, pluralism and democracy to be as it does about the place of that thought in Nietzsche's perspective.

To take an example, those who (as I see it), first, ignore how will to power in Nietzsche involves *both* the human and non-human world and, second, treat it to be exhausted by a drive to dominate others will underplay Nietzsche's own critique of projects of world mastery and will be likely to overlook the ethical elements Nietzsche folds into such a world to address dilemmas flowing from the politics of becoming. If they read Nietzsche one-dimensionally they are likely to secure existing models of democracy by showing how destructive the Nietzschean critique of them is. Those, however, who think that will to power is involved first and foremost with how the new periodically comes into being out of the density of difference might draw considerable help from the non-democrat, Nietzsche, in pursuing a democratic ethos attuned to the politics of becoming.

The same goes with respect to another Nietzschean theme interpreted by Redhead. Nietzsche:

"Equality for equals, inequality for unequals"—*that* would be the true voice of justice: and, what follows from it, "Never make equal what is unequal."⁴

I do not deny that one theme running through Nietzsche is that one class of people (but not an economic class) is superior to others; and I agree that this strain in his thought requires considerable modification from supporters of democracy. But the interesting issues begin when you proceed beyond this elementary point, asking whether Nietzsche himself can help you in accomplishing precisely the job at hand. He cannot *if* you read "unequal" in that formulation to mean *simply* that we are all placed on the same scale and that some rank more highly on that scale than others. Nietzsche, according to this understanding, finds most human beings to rank very low on the standard he endorses, while Rousseau, adopting a different standard but applying it with the same singularity Nietzsche is said to, seeks to bring all (male) citizens within his republic *up to* standard. One now emerges as inegalitarian and the other as egalitarian. But such a reading, while it hits upon a dimension in this multivalent thought, completely bypasses another more profound insight in it. Is Nietzsche, the philosopher of free spirits and singularity . . . , of polytheism as infinitely preferable to monotheism . . . , and of nobility as a relation of generosity between diverse free spirits . . . , *likely* to place everyone on a single scale? Is it likely that the very philosopher who warns us early in *Twilight of the Idols* that he writes so that those who need to can misunderstand him, will render the word "unequal" synonymous with "inequality"? When you read the quotation in the immediate context of Nietzsche's critique of Kant on universality and the spontaneous accord of the faculties in human judgments, as well as his surrounding

⁴Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 103.

discussions of the circumscribed and conditional character of beauty, the relation between Greek philosophy and the philosopher's sensual attraction to adolescent boys, his own appreciation of Emerson, and so on, it becomes very plausible to conclude that Nietzsche is signalling how adolescent boys are even more beautiful to him than, say, well-formed women. His own experience of beauty is an entrenched contingency, one he might build inhibitions around with respect to action, but not one he will heap dung upon because others experience it to deviate from the true model of taste they embody in their own desires.

This signal then infiltrates into the philosophical meaning of the formulation. The key sentence amounts to a reconfiguration of the same in relation to difference. It says: "Overcome the ugly (Kantian) assumption that everyone of the same gender is also automatically the same (equal) with respect to the model of beauty and desire inspiring them." And thus: "Never make equal what is unequal . . . , *that* would be the true voice of justice." For if you insist upon equating the proper taste of others with your taste you will be unjust: you will unjustly treat as identical that which is different. If and when you finally realize that you are often wrong in your initial presumption about others, you will then secure the sanctity of the model you purport to represent by insisting that the error resides in those who resist the universal you represent rather than in your postulation of it. You will secure a crude and narcissistic experience of the same by defining difference from what you are or pretend to be as sickness or evil. On this reading, "Never make equal what is unequal," becomes, "Don't treat those differences in others that might help you to engage elements of cultural contingency (power, chance and artistry) in what you already are as if they were unhealthy or ugly deviations from the true model you represent." Here is one way Nietzsche makes this point in *Twilight of the Idols*, calling into question the idea of a true model of selfhood against which good and bad human copies can be measured:

Are you genuine? Or only an actor? A representative? Or that which is represented?
Finally, you are no more than an imitation of an actor.⁵

This Nietzsche becomes very pertinent to contemporary issues of identity and difference, the politics of becoming, and an ethos of engagement between multiple constituencies. A reading of Nietzsche that *completely* reduces his concept of "unequal" to a relation of superiority between people on the same scale now becomes the sign of a reader unprepared to receive the protean plurivocity of human being Nietzsche thematizes. Nietzsche certainly supports the cultural superiority of free spirits (those who, among other things, do not treat the unequal as if it were equal) in their relations with "the herd"; and his constitution of the herd does require contestation. But he also expresses an appreciation of difference appropriate to contemporary democracy because it is

⁵*Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 26–7.

irreducible to any model of inequality bound to a simple logic of cultural hierarchy.

For those who seek to draw sustenance from Nietzsche in rethinking democracy the most help comes during the period starting with *Daybreak* and ending with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. After that the antidemocratic strain in Nietzsche becomes more virulent. His judgment against democracy is that most people at most times will be ill-equipped either to appreciate a polytheistic world of cultural plurality (the unequal) or to cultivate magnanimity to the politics of becoming. Such monotheistic or monosecular (it does not matter much which) people refuse to rise above transcendental egoism: they insist that what they are or pretend to be (in, say, their religious, gender, ethnic, sexual or national identity) reflects the immovable model of God, morality, reason, nature or the requirements of civilization itself against which everything else is to be measured.

My rejoinder to Nietzsche can be condensed into two points. First, it is not necessary to a late-modern “polytheistic” democracy that all people cultivate the sensibility and virtues he admires. It is only necessary that many do so, and that those who do so not be concentrated, say, in one economic class but be distributed across several positions defined by economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and so forth. That’s all(!). If such a distribution of Nietzschean virtues were to appear it would no longer be possible to place the herd anywhere in particular. The herd would be a necessary tendency, one that finds some expression everywhere and might become concentrated anywhere. Second, the combination of cultural polytheism and reciprocal generosity to difference that Nietzsche often admires as part of nobility itself in the writings in question will find expression today in a democratic culture or it will do so nowhere. I have argued this second point elsewhere.⁶ It seems imperative to democracy itself to sink these transfigured Nietzschean virtues into the democratic soil Nietzsche himself found to be barren. Nietzsche missed out on some positive possibilities residing within democracy, possibilities that find some expression in the ethos of existing democracy. Hence, my relation of “antagonistic indebtedness” to him.

My reworking of the democratic imagination contains several elements that stand in such a relation, as I now put it, of agonistic indebtedness to Nietzsche. First, I transfigure his exploration of a world of becoming into appreciation of the historically contingent and relational character of specific cultural identities, trying to appreciate both the elements of contingency in specific identities and their dependence upon the very differences through which they are constituted. Second, I transfigure Nietzschean themes of “a pathos of distance” and “the spiritualization of enmity” into an ethical relation of agonistic respect between

⁶I argue this second thesis in detail in *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), particularly chapter 5. Here, as elsewhere, I advise readers not to remain content with Redhead’s summary of a perspective for which he shows no signs of having sympathy.

contending and interdependent constituencies. Third, I transfigure “the gift giving virtue” into an ethos of critical responsiveness to the emergence of new identities as they negotiate that paradoxical and precarious migration from an abject position below the register of justice to a place on it. Fourth, I transfigure his ethical appreciation of “polytheism” over “monotheism” into pursuit of an “ethos of engagement” between numerous constituencies honoring different moral sources. Each of these modifications in the democratic imagination is prompted or inspired by something in Nietzsche. But each is to be evaluated in its own terms and in relation to the others, regardless of where the inspiration comes from. Do I misuse Nietzsche, then? I leave that question to the academic police. Are there lessons yet to be learned from Nietzsche that might compel further modification of some of these themes? I leave that question open.

III. “HOW THINGS WILL BECOME EVER MORE ‘ARTISTIC’”

Rather than rehearsing further themes already explored elsewhere, let me close by exploring a contribution by Nietzsche to democratic thought not previously considered by me. Consider one nodule in *The Gay Science*. Nodule #356 “How things will become ever more ‘artistic’ in Europe” opens with a reflection on how in old Europe, where things moved slowly, men sunk into their roles. They readily forgot how “accidents, moods and caprice disposed of them . . .” In them role *became* character, art *became* nature. “With the help of this faith classes, guilds, and hereditary trade privileges manage to erect those monsters of social pyramids that distinguish the middle ages.” Then:

But there are opposite ages, really democratic, where people give up this faith, and a certain cocky faith and opposite point of view advance more and more into the foreground {he refers to the Athenians and the Americans as prime examples}. The individual becomes convinced that he can do just about everything and *can manage almost any role*, and everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments, enjoys his experiments; and all nature ceases and becomes art.⁷

These sentences are remarkable. They point to the possibility of a democratic culture in which many people embody the virtues of self as a “work of art” that Nietzsche presents as an ideal in nodule #290. Now it turns out that the democratic culture Nietzsche can admire is the kind that encourages the generalization of this type. A world of actors expresses and supports a democratic culture very much at odds with the model Rousseau endorses and Nietzsche finds repugnant.

Nietzsche then (as you might expect) expresses ambivalence about the development he also admires.

⁷Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), #356, p. 303. The quotations to follow all come from #356, pp. 302–4.

But what I fear, what is so palpable that today one could grasp it with one's hands if one felt like grasping it, is that modern men are even now pretty far along on the same road; and whenever a human being begins to discover how he is playing a role and how he can be an actor, he *becomes* an actor.

So “the maddest and most interesting” cultures are those in which most people become actors. These are the ones in which attentiveness to and participation in the politics of becoming becomes most developed. Such a culture is, therefore, also dangerous. What is the greatest danger? We might discern it by noting what dies, and cannot return in its old form, in such a culture.

For what is dying out is the fundamental faith that would enable us to calculate, to promise, to anticipate the future . . . , namely, the faith that man has meaning only insofar as he is *a stone in a great edifice*. What will not be built anymore henceforth, and *cannot* be built anymore is . . . a society in the old sense of that word; to build that everything is lacking. Above all the material. *All of us are no longer material for a society*; this is a truth for which the time has come.

An advantage of the old type of society for a “free spirit,” was that it set members of the herd into a stone edifice, thereby containing some of the most adverse effects of herd resentment against the absence of intrinsic purpose in the world. But that world is gone. A more fluid, democratic culture rises before us. In this new world space for the free spirit can only be found in a democratic culture, if it is to be found anywhere. The danger, however, is that many will try to reinstate the paradigmatic self as stone and society as edifice under unfavorable conditions of possibility. Such an effort cannot succeed. But the attempt can wreak a lot of havoc. Nietzsche identifies this impossible drive to return to stone with the anarchists and socialists of his day. I would identify it today with the voices of fundamentalism within and around us. The fundamentalist, inside and outside the academy, is an actor who aggressively plays at being a stone. He acts as if his character is a fine copy of the true model; and he pretends character is something set in stone. Such actors insist that we must all become stones in an edifice; they pursue this objective by trying to freeze and silence those who affirm themselves as actors. Cultural war ensues. People who act as if they need not be stones collide with those who insist upon acting as if we all must be.

Both the stone-players and the actors are actors. For: *When the tempo of life quickens, and you can be an actor, you really do “become an actor.”* The positive possibility residing in this dangerous condition is that many actors will come to appreciate more of the contingencies that make them what they are; that they will then cultivate dispositions of generosity to differences within and without, partly because it is the regulation of differences in themselves that enable them to be what they are; and that they will contribute to a democratic ethos of engagement between multiple types of actor. The danger—that many will treat the stone as an unfortunate loss that must be reinstated—resides within the possibility.

When we inflect ourselves as actors and artists in the Nietzschean sense, limitations in early-modern imaginations of democracy become more visible. New possibilities open up for ethical negotiation of that persistent tension between a morally coded pattern of cultural diversity and the politics of becoming by which new identities periodically come into being. It also becomes more clear to more people that the most powerful source of cultural fragmentation today arises not out of the confluence of these forces, but out of contention for singular hegemony between stone-players, each of which acts *as if* it is a true copy of the model we must all copy. Those who insist upon trying to reinstate a world of stones foment cultural war; even though they cannot win a permanent victory they can do considerable damage to those they hold responsible for removing the stones from their edifice.

I have experimented a little with the words of Nietzsche in note #356, even as I've allowed them to work on me. That is the democratic way . . . when you affirm the democratic self as actor and modest artist. I feel confident the words of Nietzsche will survive these experiments. And the experiments themselves? They may be timely during a time in which old democratic idols of the nation, the community, the regular individual, and the (merely) procedural republic emit increasingly hollow sounds.