Living in Godless Times: Are We the Last Men?

Dr. Mattia Cacciatori,

Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution

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# **Introduction**

‘All is terrible but not yet irremediable’, are verses from Fortini, which I think exemplify the most intimate interpretations of Nietzsche’s understanding of the world. There is a common misconception that associates Nietzsche with the loss of all hope, the loss of all values, derived from his assumption, systematic in his philosophy, that any ontological truth is just an interpretation. And that interpretations tell us more about power than truth itself. In this sense, the words of a Muslim philosopher and theologian Isaac Israeli Ben Salomon *‘Non adaequatis rei et intellectus’*, echo and intersect Nietzsche’s philosophy in its entirety. In the sense that Nietzsche postulated not only the possibility, but the necessity of resisting Truths that might come across as fixed in an a-temporal a-spatial manner. And these truths, according to him, include religion/morality/ethics and more.

This stems from Nietzsche’s understanding that Truth, and in some forms reality, is a product of the dominant forces in society. As such, he puts himself in sharp contrast with all those philosophies and literatures that transform the people that live within societies into passive receivers of ontological truths that they can’t modify. This is particularly relevant today if one aims at rediscovering the potential for revolutions in a historical manner, in the time frame that has been described as the End of History by Francis Fukuyama. In other terms, since 1989 the main aim of a certain liberal ideology has instilled in the world the idea that there is a clear distinction between subjects and objects in composing the social world. And reversed this conceptualization to make the object into subject, so that the markets, the goods that we purchase, the new Apple computer on which this essay was written, own us more than we own them. Nietzsche dissents, not by claiming that this reversal doesn’t exist, but in claiming that subjects and objects can’t be distinguished one from the other. And that their relationship is the product of an historical evolution that, in turn, rejects the ‘Endist’ literatures that aim at elevating the immanent to transcendent. Almost to avert the notion that changes and transformations are possible, at least in Nietsche’s world.

In the time I was given today, I don’t want to conduct an exploration of what I consider Nietsche’s most fundamental texts Birth of the Tragedy, Human all to Human, Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil. After all, there are people who know Niezsche’s in more detail and already produced fantastic works on this subject. On this see Deleuze or Heidegger. My aim is to conduct a different kind of exercise, in line with what Adorno already argued in 1963 – in his ‘Three Studies on Hegel’. Adorno said, today is not so much important to ask what Nietzsche has said; but rather to inquire into what Hegel would presumably say if he was alive’ – to witness the evolution of contemporary international community. What is, in other terms, the relevance of the nihilistic discourse today, historically understood, and how we can make it ours to understand contemporary dynamics. How actual and compelling is Nietzsche’s discourse, especially in light of a Kantian perversion that dominated the ascension of America’s Hegemony associated with the spread of liberal ideology? To understand Nietzsche’s relevance, it seems necessary to take a step back and understand the main reasons why, in my opinion, his discourse and analysis was marginalized from the synecdochical date of November 1989.

The argument that I am interested in exploring concerns, therefore, the relevance of Nietzsche to understand our times. I will argue that three foundational elements of Nietzschean philosophy are essential to diagnose the malaise of our times: Eternal Recurrence, the “Beyond-the-Man”, and Nihilism. While I argue that these three elements are vital to diagnose the problems of contemporary international society, I will also elucidate why, I think, they don’t offer solutions to them. Nietzsche was, in other terms, correct in the diagnosis, but wrong in the prognosis. Because the solutions offered by him are centered on the sovereign individual, the further loosening of values, and the irresolved ontological question posed by Nihilism. This, in turn, doesn’t pose a credible threat to the liberal-capitalist system in place since the end of the Cold War.

# **The Manifest Inadmissibility of Nietzsche in our Society**

There is a mythology associated with the criticism that Nietzsche attracted since the late 20th Century: that his writing is too complicated therefore, it is impossible to study and understand. This line of thought is incredibly stupid. First, there are philosophers who are at least as indecipherable as Nietzsche is; and one has only to think about Deleuze; Derrida; or Zizek in more contemporary times. And second the critique doesn’t make sense internally. Try and apply a similar line of thought to other fields of human knowledge, such as Physics. Can you imagine physicists claiming that they are not studying quantum theory anymore because it is too complicated? Or Astronomists arguing that they are not considering the bending of light as an example of Einstein’s General Relativity because the math there is annoying? Of course not. And it seems pretty evident that the marginalization of Nietzsche in contemporary times has little to do with the complexity of his thought. If anything, the more complex a philosophical plexus is, the more adherent to the social reality it becomes, because it mirrors its referent’s complexity.

When one thinks about it, Kant’s conceptualisations of “Transcendental Dialectic” aren’t in any way, shape, or form, easier to conceptualize than Hegel’s Dialectic. But Kant has become the dominant philosophical archetype in political theory nonetheless. This can lead us to two propositions: either there was more willingness from scholars to inquire into Kant’s work; or Kant has been butchered in ways that Nietzsche can’t be. Here, *veritas in medio*. Kant is surely a more natural fit than Nietzsche to describe and justify the rise of an American hegemony; but it is also true that only a fraction of Kant’s work has been integrated in IR discourses. And this is specifically the First Article of Democratic Peace.

So, to inquire into some of the reasons why Nietzsche was marginalized, one has to look at both these aspects: **the manifest inadmissibility of Nietzsche in contemporary politics; and the impossibility of reading a decaffeinated version of his works**.

Within the domain of political philosophy, for a better term, two schools of thought have gained popularity in the last 30 years or so. The first one is apologetic to the system, and derives from interpretations and misinterpretations of authors like Kant, Rousseau, Locke, and (perhaps the most misappropriated one) Voltaire. This line of thought argues in favour of understanding history as a single phenomenological manifestation, almost unchangeable. And while the current system is not perfect is: a) the best we have, and b)is transcendental in its essence.

The second school of thought puts itself in sharp ideological and philosophical contraposition to the system, and refers to Marx and the neo-Marxists (Adorno, Horkheimer, Derrida, Deleuze, Marcuse etc). While ideally they stand opposed to the system, the prognosis that these authors offer focuses on the individual. This is evident from the intersection between psychoanalysis and political theory that they propose. The problem is that this school of thought developed out of a different form of the system, one in which the distinction between friends and enemies was much clearer than it is right now. So that Hegel’s dichotomy, appropriated by Marx, that contraposes master and slaves found real echoes in the bourgeoisie/proletariat relationship. Right now this distinction is far less clear, which leaves the possibility of revolution abated. Therefore, one has to look into the philosophical groundings of Marxism and neo-Marxism to note that even philosophically, the focus on the individual sustains the liberal-capitalist system instead of being opposed to it. One can argue that the two schools of thought aforementioned, in different ways, do not envisage the possibility of a drastic change in the system. And, as such, the system has reacted to them by either incorporating or diluting their philosophical tenets.

There is, however, a third line of thought that has been widely marginalised by the system. And this line of thought emerges out of the thinking of authors like Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, but also Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. This is Idealism. Idealism pertains that matter is subjugated to ideas. Ideas do not arise from the material (physis) but instead shape it. The known is always infinitively smaller than the unknown but idealists postulate, without a doubt, that all the unknown can become known. That the boundaries that limit humanity from reaching its full potential can be overcome. In this sense, Idealism is a philosophy of necessary revolutions, of activism versus passivism, of understanding change to change the understanding.

Nietzsche belong to this family of thinkers, even against his own will (just as much as Marx). Understanding why Nietzsche was marginalised is the essential first step to understand his relevance in the contemporary narrative. This is my daunting task for today, and I want to outline some specific of factors that I think are relevant to understand why Nietzsche, even more than Marx, has been ostracized in contemporary political/philosophical debate. These three will be:

1. A-Historicism;
2. Economy as a Social, not Transcendental Force;
3. The Idea of Responsibility for the Human Being.

# **Eternal Recurrence as Moral Impetus and A-historicism**

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This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!

Nietzsche, “The Gay Science”, 341.

In his 1992 Article (and book) Francis Fukuyama declared that the End of the Cold War signaled the End of History and the rise of the Last Man. In his essay, Fukuyama attempts at applying a *quasi*-Marxian analysis to the collapse of the Berlin Wall – and this leads him to argue that the fundamental engine of conflicts in the world disappeared with the collapse. It is *quasi*-Marxian because Fukuyama aims at identifying the core engine of social frictions, and how this has been overcome by the ascendance of American Hegemony. Fukuyama claims to be a Hegelian scholar, but the mere atomization of negativity in the dialectic resembles more Kantian analyses. This means that Fukuyama, unwillingly I am sure, makes the immanent transcendent by claiming that the world that emerged after 1991 has to be taken as a new ontology, fixed in time, always enduring, and unchangeable.

For Nietzsche this is problematic because of the **identity between subject and object, which means that what perceive to be true is nothing more than a subjectification of reality**. Just as much as reality objectivises the subject. In this sense, Fukuyama’s words assume a grimmer trait, in the sense that they are a reflection of the dominant paradigm. And in this sense believing in the End of History means averting any possibility of change. The object is not something separate from the subject, but poses itself in a relationship of identity and opposition towards it. It is, to use Hegel words, the historicisation of the object by the subject. (Hegel – *Kampf um Anerkennung*) Posed by the subject within a specific historical timeframe to serve an historical purpose. So that when you condemn history to capital punishment, as Fukuyama did, you need to kill Hegelian dialectic as well. Otherwise the historicisation and the subjective implications of objectivity will come back and haunt you at the first opportunity. Nietzsche’s, in my opinion, conducted a dialectical exercise focusing on the negative aspect of the dialectic, infused with Schopenauerian tones and revolutionary aims.

In this sense, the theory of Eternal Recurrence is profoundly anti-liberal and anti-capitalist because it postulates the existence of a cyclical time. In the sense that all things will come around again exactly as they were in the past. In this sense past and future do not move in opposing directions, but in the endless possibilities of the past we have to acknowledge the possibility that the present already happened an infinite number of times. The first interpretation of eternal recurrence creates an aporia in Nietzsche’s own thought. In the sense that the Will to Power, the fundamental creational force in Nietzsche’s philosophy, doesn’t really create anything. So that instead of liberating us from metaphysical forces, it brings metaphysics to the extreme. Hence my classification of Nietzsche as an idealist. The second reading of the eternal recurrence is that every choice that the human being makes becomes eternal, so that every novelty and every revolution that the Ens forwards, will be repeated forever in eternity.

The second reading, in my opinion more consistent with Nietzsche, perceive Eternal Recurrence as moral impetus. While morality is a taboo word for Nietzsche, it is clear that understanding time in a cyclical manner puts an enormous weight on the shoulders of the human being. We create, through our actions, fragments of eternity.

The theory of Eternal recurrence found fertile grounds in recent scientific discoveries, and especially in statistical mechanics and quantum physics. But more importantly, it sits in sharp contraposition to the dogmas of our times. And especially with the following four ideas: 1) Always new, always better; 2) Always progress, never regression; 3) Always natural, never responsible. The theory of eternal recurrence, in other terms, rejects three of the fundamental assumptions of our times. And this is why it’s relevant to understand the malaise of contemporary times. After all, how many times we read in the newspapers that we are going back to the Cold War? How many times we hear about the resurgence of nationalism? Of the return to a “all against all” scenario? These are not mere explanatory devices. They signal that the linearity of history, so dear to the liberal-capitalist system, is just another valu-ed. That in Nietzsche’s terms needs to be reconstructed. Because history, perceived in a non-linear form, shows the possibility (and even the necessity!) of change.

# **Nihilism, the Transvaluation of All Values and Economy as a Transcendental Force**

Outside the city, Zarathustra encounters a hermit, who insists on feeding both him and the corpse. After that, Zarathustra goes to sleep. He reawakens with the conviction that he must give up preaching to the masses, and seek out like- minded companions to join him. Rather than be a shepherd, who leads the herd, he must lure people away from the herd. The good and the just, and the believers in the true faith will hate him even more for this, for he will appear to be a lawbreaker and a breaker of the table of values. However, Zarathustra believes this breaking of laws and values will be a glorious act of creation.

Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, Prologue

Eternal recurrence, while appearing in Nietzsche’s latest works, sets the basis to understand Nihilism as a transformative force. It is no secret that Nietzsche doesn’t aim at rejecting a specific system of values, as Marx did, but aims at rejecting the idea that values outside the Will to Power naturally exist. In this sense, values for Nietzsche are not valu-es but valu-ed. In this sense, by Negating a system of values Nietzsche also negates the existence of an objective truth. While this has been read in contingency with Schopenhauer pessimism, and has led to various interpretations of Nietzsche as a destroyer of reality, I argue that Nihilism should be considered as a progressive not a destructive force. I have already hinted at this when I argued that Nietzsche can and should be read within the context of the Hegelian system of dialectic. Hegel himself dedicated relatively little space to the “antithesis” moment – a lacuna dealt with by Nietzsche. Nietzsche ultimately claims that all things are subject to interpretation whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of **power** and not **truth**.

He is almost prophetic when he says that he was going to tell “the story of the last two centuries and the uncanniest of all guests: nihilism.” But there is a distinction to make between positive and negative nihilism. The latter, refers to the complete flattening of society who contemplates the non-existence of values and attempts at living its own times the best it can. Looking for peace, looking for security, looking, in other terms, to exploit a system known to be fallacious. And this creates an ever growing tension in the society between those who can exploit the system and those who can’t (Europe as a decadent civilization, for Nietzsche but also Spangler, Toynbee, Wight and others).

Positive Nihilism, on the other hand, sees decadentism as an opportunity for the human being to take responsibility. This element is already present in The Birth of the Tragedy, where Nietzsche rediscovers the transformative force of the Dyonisiac as opposed to the “golden measure” (pan metron ariston) of the portrayed Apollinian nature of Ancient Greece. There is, in other terms, the acquiescence of the fact that the created system of values has not delivered on its prospects for the entire humankind, and as such needs to be re-constructed from the bottom up. But you can only reconstruct something that was originally constructed, not something that is transcendental in its essence. So that Nihilism, far from being a purely destructive and passive force, constitutes an impetus for a re-consideration of all values that we perceived as being transcendental.

As we did for Eternal Recurrence, it is worthwhile considering the applications of nihilism to our world. Since 1989 we have been presented with certain prospects by the political project labelled “liberalism”. 1) Capitalism and Democracy go hand in hand; 2) Capitalism and Liberalism are the “least worst” option to live our times; 3) Capitalism and Liberalism mean more security; and 4) Capitalism and Liberalism are “natural”.

1. The Rise of China challenges this view. China, even though not democratic, is outplaying the torch-bearer of capitalism, the US, at its own game. This leaves the US, but also US, in a monstrous position. We either say that the game we were told was perfect wasn’t really, and we attempt at changing the rules of the game. Or we emulate China, after claiming that democracy was the way to go forward;
2. See point above;
3. Financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of global terrorism are deeply troubling for this assumption. In the sense that capital-liberalism failed to deliver on the promises of economic prosperity and security. However, especially the consequences of these two phenomenological manifestations, highlighted that we are unwilling to take up responsibility. “It is the markets”, “it is their religion”, to it is inevitable;
4. Acknowledging something as natural means that it cannot be changed. So that if we look at the problems of our society as transcendental, we are discouraged from thinking that alternatives are possible.

Killing Nietzsche means killing the possibility of change, by declaring the end of history Fukuyama was attempting at killing history because history (and eternal recurrence and nihilism) presupposes the possibility of change. On a final note, there is an underdeveloped concept in Nietzsche that evolves from the idea of the transvaluation of all values. This concept has been further developed by Heidegger (Being in Time) but also Zizek (Absolute Recoil). This concept argues that in our times four values exist that are opposed to democracy. And these are: 1) Technology; 2) Science; 3) Religion; and 4) Economy.

Because of their undemocratic nature we are inclined to think that they are natural. So that you cannot stop Religion, or Technology, or the Economy, because they are ontological forces. When you claim that these things escape political considerations because of their ontological nature, you also claim that they can’t be controlled. And when you claim that something doesn’t have boundaries, and shouldn’t have them, that thing tends to assimilate every other consideration. So that values tend to be shaped by these four apparently a-political forces. And this leads to a re-constitution of unchangeable values that Nietzsche himself argued against.

Our times assimilated these values a-critically. Every social relationship has been transformed in something quantifiable, a sort of a social transaction that emulates economic models. Think about higher education, we speak about “credits” for every exam. We speak about “debts” if you don’t pass an exam. So on and so forth. Economy and Technology, specifically, have become new “Gods” after the Death of God.

# **The (Irresponsible) Last Men**

Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman--a rope over an abyss...

Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra

The final concept that I want to explore is perhaps the most controversial one in Nietzsche’s philosophy: the Ubermensch. As we know, the concept has been appropriated by Nazism in the mid-20th Century as exemplificative and supportive of Hitler’s idea of the Aryan race. I won’t spend too much time in outlining why I think that this appropriation and the critiques moved to Nietzsche in light of this appropriation are fundamentally wrong. I will only go on about saying that 1) most of these appropriations do not pertain to Nietzsche’s work, but with the works that his sister thoroughly redacted and 2) that Nazism is profoundly antithetical in respect to Nietzsche’s system of thinking. Nietzsche spoke against Christianity as much as he did against Judaism. The problem is that he also spoke in favor of Christianity as much as he did in favor of Judaism. In *Beyond Good and* *Evil*, he writes:“Jesus said to his Jews: ‘The law was for servants--love God as I love him, as his son! What are morals to us sons of God!’” (BGE, 164) Nietzsche’s concept of knowledge did not only allow for contradictions. It required them. Only total, comprehensive knowledge, which incorporated opposite opinions, was true knowledge for him. In this sense Nietzsche is profoundly Hegelian. Thus, it was possible for him to write for and against Judaism, for and against Christianity, for and against racism. However, he repetitively declared that their wish should be noted and accommodated and even recommends “to expel the anti-Semitic screamers from the country” because they are opposed to this endeavor. (Nietzsche was obviously not concerned with freedom of speech.) In a letter to his sister he wrote: “your association with an anti-Semitic chief expresses a foreignness to my whole way of life which fills me ever again with ire or melancholy.”

To move to more central issues for today’s discussion, Nietzsche outlines two possible reactions to Nihilism, understood as the fundamental “fact” of his times. The first one was the Ubermensch, or the “Beyond-the-Man”. In a mostly positive connotation, this individual was freed from the chains of constructed values and morality, and understood reality for what it was truly: a chaotic crucible of violence and peace, art and disgust, morality and immorality.

One way to interpret the Beyond the Man is a being who is able to make decisions free from the pressures of his times. Societal, economic, and technological pressures. A man who is not subjugated to apparently “higher” powers, both physical or metaphysical, but free to take responsibility for his own actions.

[Last Men – Beyond the Man]

In our times, we can see the concept of the last man institutionalised in the political discourse. One has to think about the fact that in their slogans and political campaigns, politicians are stressing the fact that they are like “the guy next door”. We see voting patterns in which the electorate votes for candidates who are a reflection of the everyday man. This is not representativeness. The lack of faith in institutions has perverted the original meaning of elections, which should be a process that puts the best of the best in charge. The fact that voters identify completely with their political representatives is not a positive evolution of politics, but rather signals the fact that politicians are unwilling to take their role seriously. This translates, for instance, in the growing popularity of referenda. Why do we pay politicians to make hard choices, and take responsibility for them, if when these hard choices are to be made they delegate the people?

# **Conclusions: Nietzsche as Diagnosis but not Prognosis**

To conclude, I believe that the three aspects of Nietzschean philosophy outlined throughout the talk hold incredible relevance to understand the malaise of our times. Specifically,

1. Eternal recurrence contraposes itself to the idea that the current system is “natural” and therefore unchangeable. It stresses the importance of taking responsibility for what’s happening, and presupposes the constant replacement of old “gods” with new ones.
2. Nihilism and the transvaluation of all values postulates the fact that our system of values is constructed and ever changing. And as such cannot be held as an ontological truth. Think about the importance that we give to nationality in current times;
3. The idea of the “beyond-the-man” should set the path forward. As a teleological/reflexive concepts it outlines the fact that our society is flat and individuals are looking to play the system rather than changing it.

However, while I argue that Nietzsche is a good starting point to recognize the existence of a problem, I don’t think that it fosters credible solutions. This is because if we follow Nietzsche we would realise that his proposed solutions encapsulate three main concepts.

1. Loosening values even more;
2. Individual over community;
3. Nihilism as an ontology.
4. The basis for the development of the “beyond-the-man” is the acquiescence of the fact that ALL values are constructed and as such every system of values would barbarize the human being. By getting rid of all values however we incur in the same mistake of the neo-marxists of the 1960s and 1970s. In the sense that we would believe that all the values that permeate our society are upholding the liberal-capitalist system. This has been proven not to be true. In the sense that certain values exist that limit the exercise of the capital. The State, Religion, Family. I am not saying that you have to believe in these values, but it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that their removal has freed up the space for capitalist circulation;
5. Similar to this point, Nietzsche’s focus on individual growth and the blame on society induces relativist thinking. I.e. my own moral over ethical discussions. This is perfectly in line with our society and doesn’t contrast it in any form. The discussion on the relativization of guilt and responsibility is in line with this approach. However, this form of pessimist relativism is, once more, perfectly in line with consumerism and as such doesn’t pose a credible threat to it;
6. More philosophically, believing that God is dead requires believing. Believing in nothing, requires believing. Assuming Nihilism as a central point for progress is problematic because, in Nietzsche’s own words, would be replacing an existing system of values with another one. And this necessarily leads to the “Last Men” not to the “Beyond the Man”.

So where to go after acknowledging the existence of a Nietzschean problem? My own thinking is that we should consider what we know to be true. And so far, there exist only two ontologies that we know exist beyond human interference: the individual and the communal subjects. As in, we cannot deny the existence of individuals, as an ontological category. Just as much as we can’t deny the existence of humankind. Very often these two ontological entities are treated separately by philosophers. I want to make three claims:

1. The individual and community are not separated. In fact, one is the starting point and the other is the (reflexive/teleological) ending point.
2. Everything in between is a mediation. And as such one needs to consider whether it is a positive mediation or a negative mediation. In my opinion every mediation that leans towards the individual is regressive, and everyone that presupposes its own overcoming is progressive.
3. As such we should look at those communities of individuals that by choice decide to live outside the “civilized” community. Clochards for instance. Or those communities rejected de facto by the “civilized” communities. Big city peripheries. By doing so, we should be able in the future to dissect an ontology of the community, something that is currently lacking. (Lukacs, Negri, but even Hegel have all tried to do so).