

# How Can One Be a Left Nietzschean?

*by Arnaud Sorosina*

---

**The Foucauldian analysis of the relations between power and knowledge draws on Nietzschean genealogy. For Jacques Bouveresse, however, Foucault, Deleuze, and their followers have put a left spin on the philosopher at the cost of a misinterpretation that leaves him perplexed.**

---

Review of: Jacques Bouveresse, *Les foudres de Nietzsche et l'aveuglement des disciples*, postface de J.-J. Rozat, Hors d'atteinte, 2021, 336 p., 20 €.

After having accused left Nietzscheans of cultural elitism and having too easily associated them with an epistemic constructivism deemed devastating, Bouveresse renews his attacks on those he claims use Nietzschean perspectivism to deny the existence of truth on the grounds that it is but an effect of power. For the recently deceased author of *Nietzsche contre Foucault* ("Nietzsche contra Foucault," Agone, 2016), this is an opportunity, on the one hand, to recall how central the demand for truth is to Nietzschean thought, and, on the other, to argue that Nietzsche's detestation of the core values of the political left places him on the side of reactionary philosophers far more than on that of his unfaithful epigones.

Based on this line of argument, Bouveresse advances his project on two related fronts. On the first front, he calls for rehabilitating, *contra* Foucault, the definitional requirement and, with it, the rigor of demonstration by showing that these continuously infuse Nietzsche's thought, far from the conventional relativism that his

leftist followers have attributed to him (sections 1 to 5); on the second front, he advocates for the defense of the democratic ethic that follows from this demand for truth, whereas the embrace of Nietzsche can only result in an impasse since the philosopher despised the people, democracy, progress, happiness, and related phenomena, which he subsumed under “modern ideas” (sections 6 to 10). Having rectified these two—epistemological and political—perspectives, Bouveresse thinks he can definitively discard the readings of Nietzsche that ignore or depoliticize his most outrageous statements (sections 11 to 14).

Yet, his demonstration, which revives D. Losurdo’s accusation against the Nietzscheans of engaging in a “hermeneutics of innocence,” leaves one perplexed.

## **Truth and Power in Nietzsche and Foucault**

To support the first part of his demonstration, Bouveresse recalls that Nietzsche sought to dispel the confusion between what is true and what appears to be true: In the analysis of the theatricality of social life, the will to truth gives way to the will to illusion, and this in a manner that is not only salutary, but also perfectly necessary. The Nietzschean valorization of appearance is nevertheless indexed on its value for the maintenance of life, which does not at all exclude that certain robust forms of life do require truth as a condition of existence. This is why, if we are to believe Bouveresse, Nietzsche carefully distinguishes, *contra* Foucault, between the effect of (artistic-theatrical) truth and truth itself (p. 17). Indeed, Nietzsche reproaches Wagner, in particular, for ultimately being only the actor of his own ideal, the latter having been alienated by his urbane histrionism, an attitude that completed the rupture between the philosopher and the composer. Where the forces of inertia inherent to gregarious social life produce laxness, the philosopher presents himself instead as a “genius of truth” who gathers himself courageously to become what he is, namely, an authentic individual. Having reached this point, Bouveresse addresses an essential question to Nietzsche and Foucault:

“How is it possible, after having formulated the sort of radical critique that both of them address, in two different ways, to the idea of truth itself, to maintain the kind of eminent exception that is presumed to be simultaneously required for the philosopher?” (p. 28)

From this perspective then, it appears that Nietzsche considers himself an inspired genius, whereas Foucault concedes importance to the demand for truth, which Bouveresse sees as a purely formal statement. Although Foucault never said

that truth is only an effect of power, he “generally seemed more concerned with the kind of effect that his assertions could produce on the public than with the truth of these assertions and with the quality of the arguments he was able to formulate in its favor,” which is why he “should perhaps have worried a little earlier and more seriously about how he was understood” (p. 33).

One more step and Foucault becomes the prodrome of the post-truth era (p. 35).

To be sure, Bouveresse’s analysis is not without nuance: The attack on Foucault seems to be directed more against the “blindness of the disciples,” past and present. Yet, Bouveresse does blame Foucault for the erring of his arrogant disciples, who are reluctant to accept truth and who hide this cowardice under the veneer of a “courageous rebellion against power” (p. 37). While it is true that he speaks “of what Foucault largely succeeded in making people believe, and not of what he himself believed” (p. 37), this raises an interesting problem that he never addresses directly: Under what conditions is an author like Nietzsche or Foucault accountable for the co-optations and deformations to which his thought has been subjected? Bouveresse, it seems to me, supposes this question to have been a little too quickly settled when he reproaches Foucault for not sufficiently considering the theory of knowledge and when he thinks himself justified in asserting as an indisputable fact that:

“With regards to truth, few philosophers have contributed as strongly as Foucault has—whether voluntarily or not—to encouraging a mode of sophistical reasoning that has unfortunately enjoyed considerable success, notably among philosophers and sociologists” (p. 60).

Against this manner of considering truth through the embrace of Nietzsche, Bouveresse recalls that the need for deceit does not at all mean that one ought to abandon truth, insofar as what one ought to examine is the type of life that wants and needs deceit. He also reminds us that only passive nihilism resigns itself to the idea that there can be no truth, whereas active nihilism derives from this idea the motive for a greater will to create, a position that had the potential to please the artistic avant-gardes.

Nietzsche’s hesitation between two characterizations of the will to power is of interest to Bouveresse because it foregrounds the will to power as a metamorphic activity—a Heraclitean aspect that leftist readers have retained to stress that everything is becoming and creation (p. 129)—even as the philosopher’s thought is otherwise driven by what he himself calls the “passion of knowledge,” a philosopheme that the book grasps only indirectly, when it evokes Nietzsche’s famous

letter to his sister saying that the service of truth requires the sacrifice of happiness. Bouveresse concludes from this that the philosopher's thought is torn between two attitudes: To maintain that there can be no knowledge of any kind, and to assert that there can be knowledge only from a particular perspective.

## **Nietzsche: A Reactionary Philosopher?**

Not content with assimilating Nietzschean genealogy to a nominalist reduction of truth, Foucault (or the Foucauldians?) assimilates the genealogy of morals to a critique of power as power. It is in this condemnation of power that Bouveresse locates the heart of the divergence between Foucault and Nietzsche: In his opposition to modern ideas, Nietzsche justified subjugation as a structural necessity for any social or political ontology and countered the critiques of power that emanated from socialism and anarchism, as evidenced by the feeling of quasi-devastation that the episode of the Commune aroused in him.

In the light of these remarks, Bouveresse considers that Foucault makes a very un-Nietzschean use of Nietzsche (p. 52), to the point of identifying in the Foucauldian critique of power a typically nihilistic enterprise from a Nietzschean point of view. From there the reader witnesses a long series of scattered observations which, by the accumulation of arguments and excerpts more than by a rigorous philological demonstration, are intended to link Nietzsche to the constellation of reactionary thinkers.

In this respect, the author's analyses do not seem original or particularly troubling after decades of scientific studies on the German philosopher. Bouveresse even draws on the work of Domenico Losurdo<sup>1</sup> on several occasions, though with the reservation that Nietzsche was not an entirely political thinker, but simply a "very political" one. Through the confrontation of Nietzsche with the political ideas of his time, Bouveresse establishes that upstream of the Revolution, the philosopher's anti-egalitarianism placed him on the side of Voltaire, not the side of Rousseau, and that downstream of it, he was on the side of counter-revolutionaries like Hippolyte Taine, insofar as he had only contempt for the values of the left which, via hedonistic progressives like John Stuart Mill, gradually imposed happiness as a new idea in the Europe of the "last man."

---

<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, *Nietzsche, philosophe réactionnaire*, Delga, 2008; *Nietzsche, le rebelle aristocratique*, Delga, 2016.

In the light of these considerations, how can one explain the exegetical twist to which Nietzsche was subjected in the 1960s and 1970s in France—with Bouveresse, surprisingly, not saying a word about what has been written since<sup>2</sup> (and elsewhere)? Bouveresse draws here on Louis Pinto,<sup>3</sup> for whom the intellectual left of the period was seduced by Nietzsche's elitism and aristocratism, which was very prevalent in avant-garde cultural discourse and was tolerated and even promoted in the artistic field. Furthermore, Bouveresse suggests that Foucault brought grist to the mill of the defenders of historical and cultural relativism—with Nietzsche's genealogical method offering a pretext to discover behind the "will to truth" a form of power that needed to be criticized. It is at this point that Nietzsche, regardless of what he had in mind, became the instrument of democratism: To be Nietzschean then meant to make the genealogy of the inequitable relations of domination hiding under the affable veneer of knowledge. Yet, Bouveresse reminds us that with Nietzsche the struggle for more democracy can only lead to the emergence of new tyrants who will put it to death, such that the struggle for democracy consists in fact in its slow euthanasia. Hence the author's astonishment:

"It is truly astounding and, in some ways, disturbing that Nietzsche can be so loved and admired by so many leftist readers and philosophers, who are fervent defenders of democratism and even of what might be called democratic radicalism. One would at least like them to realize from time to time how far from being reciprocal their relationship with their hero is" (p. 167).

Bouveresse then suggests that in the days when politics was a substitute theology, all manner of arguments, however specious, were mobilized (p. 176). In the light of this consideration, the author makes one of his most sophisticated conclusions, at the moment when his astonishment leads him to contest the present: "We live," he writes, "in an age that is capable of enthusing about the thinker Nietzsche and of thinking like him (or at least of imagining that it does), and at the same time of imperturbably continuing to want like Mill" (p. 297). It is not a very glowing portrait, but one inspired by modernity—or rather by the latest leftist trend: To want the happiness of the last man while continuing to dream oneself a superhuman.

---

<sup>2</sup> While Bouveresse's critique of Nietzsche's metaphorical interpretations could be aimed at either Sarah Kofman or Eric Blondel, in any case he seems to ignore the work of the *Groupe International de Recherches sur Nietzsche* (GIRN) led by Patrick Wotling in France, or, to give another example, the formidable interpretive work of Colli and Montinari's heirs, Giuliano Campioni and Paolo d'Iorio.

<sup>3</sup> *Les Neveux de Zarathoustra. La réception de Nietzsche en France*, Paris, Seuil, 1991. An examination of *Nietzsche en France* (Paris, Puf, 1999) by Jacques Le Rider would have allowed Bouveresse to formulate a much more nuanced diagnosis.

## Nietzsche and the Principle of Charity

Yet, between taking cognizance of Nietzsche's rhetoric and reactionary sources, on the one hand, and asserting that the philosopher, as a new Calicles, has nothing to oppose to the exercise of any type of power, on the other hand, there is a step that seems to me philologically and philosophically impossible to take. Moving Nietzsche to the political camp of the right does not offer a philosophically more convincing solution. Provided that we agree a little more clearly on what slavery is, we can certainly grant Bouveresse that for Nietzsche:

"It is not at all a question of creating a society in which all forms of slavery would have disappeared, but of creating the new form of slavery that, in the present situation, would be the most appropriate for the pursuit of the goal that one must set oneself and that is and will always be the same: To fortify, in the interest of life's will to power, the strong as much as possible and to limit the pretensions of the weak to the maximum" (pp. 123-124).

Bouveresse subscribes to an interpretation which, in line with that proposed by Arno Mayer in *La Persistance de l'Ancien Régime* ("The Persistence of the *Ancien Régime*"), places Nietzsche in the light of his political significance in his time and draws him closer to Baudelaire's aristocratic dandyism so as to deny a possible Tocquevillian lineage in his critique of the tyranny of mediocrity.

However, to consider that Nietzsche, as an individual, exemplifies the representational matrices that characterized 19<sup>th</sup> century reactionary thought is to commit a *diallelos*, which consists in refraining from viewing the categories of an author's "political thought" as the product of a philosophical idiosyncrasy by assimilating them to an "ideological camp." This reassuring reading seems seductive in retrospect by virtue of the simplification effect that it produces, but it is and assumes itself to be hermeneutically devoid of *interpretative charity*. Indeed, it is precisely here that lies the heart of the fundamental and insoluble disagreement between Bouveresse and the Nietzscheans he targets: The refutation of the "hermeneutics of innocence" allows him to gain in contextual intelligibility what he loses in diacritical understanding, at the cost of a leveling effect that constitutes a problematic bias.

Bouveresse seems to me to dissolve the specificity of the idea of the will to power into its reactionary lineage. On the one hand, Nietzsche always appropriated authors in order to make use of them—in this sense, his reading practice brings him much closer to Foucault, who never claimed that being Nietzschean meant being faithful to the letter of Nietzsche's text, than to Bouveresse. On the other hand, if

Bouveresse claims to give an account of what Nietzsche really said, why does he not respect the reading pact whereby the reading of such an author must take seriously his aristocratic pretension not to be soluble in his “epoch”?

Thus, when Bouveresse writes that many of Nietzsche’s statements are tolerated only because they are Nietzsche’s, even though they would arouse the indignation of many readers if they were not, he presupposes the validity of a counterfactual argument, the legitimacy of which Nietzsche would have radically contested:

“As Losurdo points out, far from mitigating them, one must, on the contrary, radicalize tendencies which, if they were not his, would not fail to cause serious concern and immediate protest among many readers” (p. 230).

However, Nietzsche does not pretend to be just anybody. Above all, there is reason to believe that this pretension is legitimate as a pretension, if one can show that he does not speak under the influence of a conviction born of an intemperate vindictiveness, a complacent doxa, or, *a fortiori*, an ideology.

Thus, by failing to distinguish between the ontological perspective, which conceives of the will to power as a play of relations between dominant and dominated forces, and the cultural perspective, which assesses the balance between these forces, Bouveresse implies that Nietzsche commits a naturalistic paralogism which is anything but naïve—and similar to the one committed by Nazism (p. 293, with a quotation from Hitler)—and which consists in legitimizing the exercise of force by the mere fact that it is exercised, based in particular on a hasty reading of §259 of *Beyond Good and Evil* (p. 179).

This is to neglect the role that the Nietzschean conception of sublimation plays in the passage from a descriptive level of power relations as a general interpretation of the nature of reality to an axiological level that determines the legitimate criterion for the exercise of the will to power in human relations. At least, let us grant Bouveresse a profession of humility: He gives up explaining what the will to power means for Nietzsche because he is not sure that he understands it himself (p. 240). Yet, if this is the case, why subscribe all along to Losurdo’s reading, which offers an understanding of this philosopheme that reduces ontology to politics in order to turn the latter into Nietzsche’s primary philosophy?

If, in recent decades, scholars of all political persuasions have examined Nietzsche’s work without being scandalized by his outrageous statements, one has to

wonder whether this is only due to the fanaticism of followers or because there are good exegetical reasons for it.

Far from being legitimate in all aspects of its manifestations, the exercise of the will to power derives its value, in the field of culture, from an essential criterion: The level of mastery it displays over the powers it dominates in order to become a will that channels and intensifies the life from which it emanates. Therefore, the fact that, at the ontological level of interpretation, the spontaneous play of power relations is amoral because it is necessary does not authorize us to prescribe the spontaneous exercise of these powers in the context of their political manifestation. In the first case, it is only a question of the Dionysian innocence of becoming; in the second, this innocence becomes pure cruelty, since culture exists only by virtue of subjecting Dionysus to the forces of sublimation of the Apollonian asceticism which gives it form, as Nietzsche repeatedly claimed from 1869 on. Under Bouveresse's pen, the entire Nietzschean philosophy of culture, which initially appeared in the first of the *Unmodern Observations* published in 1873, is crushed by the reading of the political aphorisms of the years 1886-1888.<sup>4</sup>

The interpreters who have studied the problem of culture since the 1980s<sup>5</sup> have the right not to take Nietzsche to the letter—if “to the letter” means in the light of what hurried readers want to consider as literal—when he writes that the weak and the botched shall perish, because beyond the obvious excess of falsely Darwinian rhetoric, the principles of his philosophy of culture do not at all allow to see in it a political prescription for some sort of ethnocide. This is what Bouveresse senses when he writes that Nietzsche, failing to be an “all-political” thinker, is an “all-cultural” thinker (p. 265). If such a distinction had been his starting point and not his ending point, he would have perhaps written another book. Indeed, without a detailed examination of the theory of culture that Nietzsche developed since his early reflections on the Greeks, the interpretation of the most provocative statements found in his later works, let alone in some posthumous fragments taken in isolation, misses the point: The violence of Dionysus has no valid cultural outcome except under the rule of Apollo.

In short, had Bouveresse seriously engaged with recent interpreters who are not mere apologists, he might have been led to revise the binary opposition that Losurdo

---

<sup>4</sup> The reader will find a more substantial and fine exposition of Nietzsche's position before his mature works in Michèle Cohen-Halimi's recent book, *L'Action à distance. Essai sur le jeune Nietzsche politique*, Nous, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, the canonical works in France are those of Éric Blondel, *Nietzsche, le corps et la culture*, Paris, Puf, 1986, and Patrick Wotling, *Nietzsche et le problème de la civilisation*, Paris, PUF, 1995.



sought to impose between a soteriological hermeneutic and a supposedly objective historical hermeneutic. To be sure, Bouveresse conducts the analysis with his usual tact and balance, and there is hardly any reason to doubt his good faith when he expresses astonishment.

However, these notable qualities of Bouveresse's philosophical *ethos* make his partisan interpretation all the more dangerous, for this interpretation produces, against the seductive effect of the brilliant philosophies he takes to task, the no less seductive effect of the clarity of geometric rationality. Such clarity comes to overshadow, among other things, the spirit of finesse for which Nietzsche, who was one of its most demanding practitioners, deserves to be credited.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), January 12, 2022

Translated by Arianne Dorval with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info)

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), May 2, 2023