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Book Review of, Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History

R. Kevin Hill

Portland State University, hillrk@pdx.edu

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Review of Christian J. Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*,
Cambridge University Press, 2008, in *Political Theory*, 38, 169-172.

Since interest in Nietzsche began to take off in the 1970s, there has been an ever-growing literature on him, yet there has been a curious reluctance to situate him in his historical context. It is one of the great merits of Christian Emden's study *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* that he attempts one of the richest and most detailed accounts of Nietzsche's relationship to late nineteenth century Germany's cultural and political inheritance, situation and challenges. Indeed, I can think of no other book that is remotely as successful since M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern's *Nietzsche on Tragedy*.

What explains the seeming reticence of so many authors to situate Nietzsche in his historical context? In part, the national communities in which interest with Nietzsche has arisen are those most traumatized by Nazism. If one frames the history of Germany as a process leading up to Nazism, everything in it is tainted. But doesn't Nietzsche himself speak most vehemently against German nationalism and anti-Semitism? There is a tendency to read these remarks as a kind of "get out of jail free" card which permits us to get on with more ahistorical readings. But if we overemphasize the value of this resistance for licensing our own interest in Nietzsche, we may at the very same time that we note it, miss its historical significance.

It is the great merit of Emden's book that he grapples with the question, what in Nietzsche's context makes him do genealogy in the first place? After the Wars of

Liberation, the agenda was establishing a unified German state founded on Enlightenment principles, ironically both resisting France in the name of freedom while implementing a very similar political program. Germany came closest to realizing this goal in the revolutions of 1848, after which liberalization took a back seat to the national unification through war rather than revolution. Nietzsche too was a National Liberal, until national unification was achieved without corresponding liberalization. Almost immediately thereafter, Nietzsche began to have doubts.

To legitimate an insufficiently liberal Imperial Germany a historical narrative emerges of the German people's struggles and triumphs, from the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, to victory in the Franco-Prussian War. The political dimension of this history is an on-going struggle with oppressive Roman, Roman Catholic and Romance language powers. The ideological dimension is Protestant Christianity.

However, just as this rallying narrative was taking shape, academic historical research was paving the way for a far more dispersed, contingent and non-teleological picture of historical process, and much of this research was also coming from German academics. Emden does not stress this point, but another source of pressure on teleological accounts of history came from associating them with Hegel. Though many Anglophone readers associate Hegel with the legitimation of Prussian state interests, in the late nineteenth century many Germans associated him with the liberalizing ideals of the failed revolutions of 1848, many of whose ideologues spoke a peculiar argot of Hegelese, most notably, Karl Marx. The decline in the respectability of "Whiggish" histories came at an

inopportune time given the ideological needs of the new Germany.

Emden calls this the crisis of historicism, a term we usually associate with somewhat later developments in historical thought, and noting Nietzsche's academic position and specialty, sees Nietzsche as driven to at the very least explore the problem of historical knowledge and methodology, and ultimately to turn the new historical thinking against the new ideological narrative. Thus genealogy, thus Nietzsche's opposition to German nationalism, for the latter is founded on a lie. What emerges from the acid bath of genealogical insight is a new political realism, and a new ethic of responsibility embedded within it. On Emden's account, Nietzsche's similarities to Max Weber are no fluke, for Emden gives us, in the end, a surprisingly Weberian Nietzsche.

Though Emden's account is remarkably rich, and plausible, there are alternative ways of framing the data he has so helpfully provided us with. First, he posits a hard division between *Birth of Tragedy* and all that follows it. It is helpful to see the *Untimely Meditation* on history as of a piece with the Nietzsche of the later 1870s, and in turn with the Nietzsche of the *Genealogy*. Crucial to Emden's account is Nietzsche's alleged abandonment of "neo-humanism," an ideology of self-cultivation through encounter with antiquity, between *Birth of Tragedy* and *Untimely Meditations*. In part, Emden's concern is to rightly distance himself from overly aestheticist readings of Nietzsche by locating the virus of aestheticism within *Birth of Tragedy* and quarantining it there. But is it really true that Nietzsche loses all concern with *Bildung* thereafter? Such a reading must do more to come to terms with *Zarathustra* which would "teach [us:] the *Ueberschensch*."

Identifying the *Uebermensch* with the Weberian ideal of political realism and political responsibility seems missing something that more perfectionistic readings, whatever their flaws, are trying to capture.

What about historicism? This problem is not just the result of better empirical knowledge of history, for it follows from successive acceptance and rejection of the Hegelian model of history itself. Given Hegel's idealism, there can be no such thing as standards of knowledge or morality outside of a particular, historically situated, context. Hegel avoids relativism by supposing each historical stage contains the seeds of its own destruction which gives birth to another historical stage, that there is always only one possible path in these transitions, and that the succession of these stages and transitions represents a teleological self-actualization. Abandon the notion of unique transition and teleological self-actualization, and historical relativism more or less immediately follows. While it is certainly true that Nietzsche rejects teleological accounts of history, and that such a rejection is central to the conception of genealogy, he shows little interest in historical relativism, for lurking in the background of all of Nietzsche's analyses after a certain point is the notion of "power" as an external standard. This may be a semantic quibble and perhaps a Nietzsche divested of his interest in "strength" and "health" would have to become such a relativist, but despite our discomfort with those notions, they are hard to read out of Nietzsche altogether.

These issues are relevant to how Emden understands how genealogy relates to Nietzsche's struggle against German nationalism's legitimating historical narrative. For

Emden, the central message of genealogy is that legitimation through any teleological narrative is a lie. If Enlightenment ideal legitimation is unavailable too, then Imperial Germany's claims to be the culmination of millenia of struggle for freedom by the German people can only inspire disgust. Thus Weberian political realism. But this is curiously formalistic. It doesn't much matter what the history genealogy reveals is, as long as it is sufficiently non-teleological, contingent, and shot through with power struggles. Surprisingly, this aligns Emden with postmodern appropriators of Nietzsche who like the idea of genealogy but have little use for the historical accounts Nietzsche provides.

But Nietzsche's emphasis is as much on the cultural consequences of how German self-understanding fails. Not only is the Protestant Reformation a lie, but appealing to it is a shot in the arm for Protestantism itself. The result is an obstacle to what Nietzsche sees as the cultural benefits of being informed by the legacy of Rome, the Renaissance, and the Napoleonic era. For Emden's Nietzsche genealogy is the mere discovery that one's legitimating myths are false, and that history has no particular significance. But for the Nietzsche of the Genealogy European history has the significance of a slowly unfolding catastrophe. And worst of all, the success of the German state, coming at the expense of a missed opportunity for the Napoleonic unification of Europe, keeps nationalism in play as a distraction from cultural tasks.

What Nietzsche championed was not so much Napoleon as a moral ideal, but a kind of nostalgia for the cultural climate of the Napoleonic era, and this is simply inaccessible to

us. What did he oppose? His hostility to German nationalism is that it is too Protestant, to Protestantism that it is too Christian, and to Christianity that it is too... Jewish. That is likely where the road that a complete historical contextualizing leads, and it is unsurprising that almost everyone who now values Nietzsche's many insights is wary of going down it. It is to Emden's great merit that he has begun a far more serious and historically informed investigation of who Nietzsche as a thinker of the historical and the political was, and what he wanted. But perhaps sixty-four years is not distance enough for Nietzsche to become history--he is still one of us, and thus too caught up in our concerns, and anxieties, for us to begin to safely recount who he was.