Review Articles


Re-Reading Nietzsche with Domenico Losurdo’s Intellectual Biography

Domenico Losurdo, Professor of History of Philosophy at the University of Urbino and a well-known figure in Rifondazione Comunista, is one of the world’s leading Hegel scholars and an expert on nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectual history. He also exemplifies the cultural gap that still persists between the theoretical cultures of continental Europe and the Anglo-American world. While strongly influencing Italian academia with over twenty monographs, only two of them have made it to an English translation so far: Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West1 and Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns. And, whereas his book Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico has sparked off a heated debate in Italy stretching from L’Osservatore Romano to Il Manifesto, from La Repubblica to IL Corriere della Sera, from La Stampa to l’Unità,2 it has been received with few review articles so far in the Anglophone press.3

A German translation is on its way and will be published by Argument Verlag. An English edition should be prepared as soon as possible. It is especially the Anglo-Saxon humanities, with their strong underpinnings of postmodernist Nietzscheanism, that are in urgent need of a critical-historical reconstruction of the ideological processes underlying their own practice. Losurdo’s voluminous book, about 1,150 pages in length, could become a landmark for the renewal of critical Nietzsche research. It is not only the most comprehensive study on the connections between Nietzsche’s philosophy and his politics, but also the most thorough and analytical.

In the following pages, I will take his interpretation as both a starting point and guide for a re-reading of Nietzsche, on the basis of which I will, in turn, look back at the way that Losurdo reads him.4 In this way, I will try to arrive at some criteria for specifying Losurdo’s methodological approach and critically evaluating his interpretation.

2. See the collection of articles available at: <http://www.filosofia.it/pagine/argomenti/Losurdo/Losurdo.htm>.
4. Since there is no critical edition of Nietzsche in English (the planned Stanford edition based on the Colli and Montinari edition collapsed after three volumes), I have translated parts of the Unpublished Fragments myself. In what follows, I will give the respective number of the aphorism and add the volume and page of the German edition (KSA). See bibliography for abbreviations.
Losurdo’s distance from Lukács

‘And He Was a Destroyer of Reason After All’ was the title of a review in a well-known German newspaper praising Losurdo’s book for countering the predominant softening-up of Nietzsche’s image with a critique ‘in the sense of Lukács.’ The review is certainly right in pointing out Losurdo’s opposition to a ‘hermeneutics of innocence’ that subjugates even Nietzsche’s bluntest statements – from the support of slavery to the annihilation of the weak and degenerate – to an allegorical pattern of interpretation, thereby diluting them into metaphor, for instance when Gianni Vattimo explains Nietzsche’s celebration of war as a ‘negation of the unity of being’ (pp. 653, 781ff, 798ff). But can it really be true that Losurdo wants to take up this battle once again in the conceptual framework provided by Lukács’s paradigm, including Nietzsche under the rubric of a philosophical ‘irrationalism from Schelling to Hitler’ and thus treating him as an immediate intellectual forerunner of the Nazi state? This interpretation has become as popular (far beyond the account provided by Lukács) as it is methodologically disputable, because it forces Nietzsche’s philosophy into a teleology directed towards fascism and skips over a considerable historical distance. As convincingly shown by Martha Zapata Galinda, among others, the relation between Nietzsche and Nazism is neither to be conceived of as an automatic consequence of his philosophy nor as an external manipulation, but rather as a process of ‘fascisation [Faschisierung]’, in terms of an ideological transformation consisting of determinate interventions into specific constellations of bourgeois hegemony.

Fortunately, the Lukács label is a result of the reviewer’s misunderstanding, caused most likely by a widespread image that makes Lukács the representative for any Marxist critique of Nietzsche (as well as the scapegoat for an anti-Marxist reaction). To defend Lukács, as Losurdo does, against the denunciation that he has adopted the Nazis’ interpretation of Nietzsche and merely added a negative value judgement (pp. 781, 798), or to recall Lukács’s project of a political deciphering of Nietzsche’s thinking – in contrast to Foucault’s coquettish presumption to be entitled to ‘deform’ it and make it ‘squeak’ and ‘cry’ without caring for textual accuracy (p. 791) – has nothing to do with a continuation of Lukács’s approach but testifies instead to Losurdo’s integrity as a scholar. When Losurdo describes hostility to the French Revolution and socialism as an ongoing trait that traverses the different periods of Nietzsche’s work, he does not convey anything specifically Lukácsian, but rather summarises a conclusion quite common among those scholars who take seriously the question of the political embeddedness of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Even the radically anti-Marxist historian Ernst Nolte comes to the conclusion that ‘Losurdo is right in pointing out that the hostility against socialism was the continuous fact in Nietzsche’s intellectual existence’.

7. ‘The only tribute to thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if commentators then say I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest’ (Foucault 1980, pp. 53–4).
8. Nolte remains faithful to his vehement anti-Marxism when he criticizes Losurdo for siding with Marx and overlooking the ‘excess’ of the latter’s idea of communism: ‘Is the image of the “blonde beast” really so much more absurd than the ideal of those classless and eschatological human beings no longer subject to any division of labour…?’ (Nolte 2003). Translations mine.