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by *Matthew P. Bennett*

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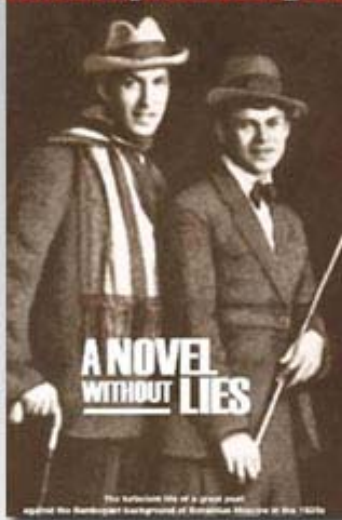
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## ON A DEMOCRATIC FUTURE: NIETZSCHE, DERRIDA, AND DEMOCRACY TO COME

MATTHEW P. BENNETT\*

**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I analyse and critically assess Jacques Derrida's political reading of Nietzsche. Derrida's reading of Nietzsche's multiple styles and their ramifications for how we read philosophical texts is well known. But Derrida also maintained that Nietzsche's addresses to an unknown future readership evidenced a democratic aspect to Nietzsche's work. Derrida's is a heretofore unexamined interpretation, and in this paper I aim to show that his emphasis on the democratic style of Nietzsche's writing raises different questions about the kind of political values that support Nietzsche's critique of modernity. I argue that Derrida's reading merits discussion, particularly in virtue of its intriguing account of what it means to experience the future democratically. However, I think Derrida's reading has its own exegetical and philosophical problems. In sections one and two I explain why Derrida thought that Nietzsche's hopes for the future of Europe constitute a democratic comportment; in section three I show how this reading of Nietzsche can be defended against a philosophical objection to its plausibility; and in section four I suggest exegetical reasons for questioning Derrida's interpretation. I will end by drawing on Nietzsche's work to raise an objection to the political quietism of democracy to come.

**Keywords:** *Nietzsche, Derrida, democracy to come, messianism*

Some accounts of Nietzsche would have us believe that his work was unequivocally anti-democratic. We are told by some that Nietzsche's anti-egalitarianism, elitism, aristocratism, and distaste for nineteenth-century democratic politics are wholly incompatible with pro-democratic political theory.<sup>1</sup> Relatively recent study of Nietzsche has countered this orthodox understanding of his political views. Readers such as Lawrence Hatab, David Owen, Mark Warren, and William Connolly have made a variety of attempts to argue that some contemporary democratic theory is

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Fredrick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Don Dombowsky, 'A Response to Alan D. Schrift's "Nietzsche For Democracy?";' *Nietzsche-Studien* 29 (2000); and Herman W. Siemens, 'Nietzsche's Critique of Democracy (1870-1886),' *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38 (2009).

compatible with and perhaps even supported by Nietzsche's work.<sup>2</sup> These readings have added to an emerging body of literature that addresses a broader range of political issues raised by Nietzsche;<sup>3</sup> we might say that now more than ever before Anglo-American Nietzsche scholarship not only accepts Nietzsche as a significant figure in moral theory, but also as a possible contributor to political philosophy.

Debate over the democratic credentials of Nietzsche's philosophy has tended to focus on his potentially conflicting themes of an emancipating pluralism on the one hand, and domination, hierarchy and 'healthy aristocracy' on the other (see for instance *Beyond Good and Evil* §258). Those who write of a democratic Nietzsche will locate democratic thought in his resistance to the dogmatism of 'universal' values. They will argue that Nietzsche's perspectivism, insofar as it insists on a multiplicity of values and truths engaged in agonistic debate, is a democratic philosophy. Conversely, those who have argued against the validity of a democratic Nietzsche have emphasised his anti-egalitarianism, claiming that Nietzsche's belief in the difference in worth between individuals is irreconcilable with democratic principles of equality.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I aim to reconstruct Derrida's position on this issue. Derrida's account of Nietzsche has the virtue of acknowledging the themes emphasised by both pro- and anti-democratic Nietzsche interpretations, while avoiding their problems. Derrida's contribution to the issue of Nietzsche's potential for democratic thought is to reflect on how Nietzsche oriented himself to his contemporary culture and in particular how he did this with a certain attitude toward the future of this culture. Derrida's reading of Nietzsche ultimately lead him to claim that Nietzsche's orientation toward the future is characteristically democratic. I hope to explain what Derrida

<sup>2</sup> See William E. Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Lawrence J. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: an Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995); David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: a Critique of Liberal Reason* (London: Sage, 1995); Alan D. Schrift, 'Nietzsche for Democracy?' *Nietzsche-Studien* 29 (2000); Alan D. Schrift, 'Nietzschean Agonism and the Subject of Radical Democracy' *Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* 27 (2001); and Mark E. Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> The development of this area of the literature is perhaps best reflected in two recent publications from Peter Sedgwick (*Nietzsche: the Key Concepts*, (New York: Routledge, 2009)), and Frank Cameron and Don Dombowsky (*Political Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)). It is not insignificant that Sedgwick has saw fit to include a section on Nietzsche's politics, in which he addresses among other interpretations the recent surge in readings that propose a democratic Nietzsche. Nor can we ignore Cameron and Dombowsky's decision to publish a whole anthology dedicated solely to offering a primer to those interested in Nietzsche political thought (a primer which also includes a chapter devoted to Nietzsche's thought on democracy). See also Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau: Nietzsche's Moral and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: the Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Tamsin Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that authors who have taken these positions have been blind to the motivating factors of their opponents. Hatab, for instance, is at pains to explain how Nietzsche's repudiation of 'substantive equality' and 'equal regard' could be compatible with a democratic position.

meant by this and in doing so both contribute to a debate in Nietzsche scholarship and, more broadly, explore what it might mean to take up a democratic orientation toward the future, at least in line with Derrida's analysis of democracy.

I also aim to show that while Derrida offers a new of reading Nietzsche as democratic, this reading is subject to equally new criticisms, which expose new reasons for dismissing the idea that Nietzsche would endorse democratic values. In the final section of this paper I will consider an objection to Derrida's reading that raises problems both for Derrida's exegesis and for his philosophy. The objection is that Nietzsche would refute the motivational capacity of an indiscriminate openness to the future. Insofar as this objection highlights incompatibility between Derrida's democratic orientation to the future and Nietzsche's philosophy, it challenges Derrida as a reader of Nietzsche; insofar as it constitutes an objection to 'democracy to come' *per se*, it challenges the value of thinking about the future democratically.

## I

Derrida's account of the democratic aspect of Nietzsche took its most explicit form in 'Nietzsche and the Machine', an interview with Derrida concerning his publications on Nietzsche. Conducted in 1993, the interview precedes the publication of *Politics of Friendship, Spectres of Marx* and *Rogues*, publications which would comprise Derrida's more influential studies of democracy. Asked how his own critique of the history of philosophy situates him in relation to Nietzsche's critique of democracy, Derrida responds by saying 'I do not consider Nietzsche to be an *enemy of democracy in general*'.<sup>5</sup>

This is not a unique position; Nietzsche scholars who have argued for a 'democratic Nietzsche' have found it necessary to narrow the scope of Nietzsche's anti-democratic sentiments in order to leave room for theories of democracy compatible with Nietzsche.<sup>6</sup> However Derrida adds that 'Nietzsche critiques a particular form of democracy in the name of "a democracy to come"'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Derrida claimed that Nietzsche would have endorsed Derrida's own analyses of democracy that followed in the 90s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Derrida's critique of extant concepts of democracy apparently echoes Nietzsche's. But what would it mean

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Hatab (1995), chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Prima facie* this is a hyperbolic and reductive comment typical of Derrida's more accessible yet nevertheless often simplistic statements that can be found in interviews such as this. However it would appear that the suggestion that Nietzsche wrote in the name of a democracy to come is not exclusive to 'Nietzsche and the Machine'. In light of this interview, closer inspection of Derrida's political writings reveals that this claim is consistent with related scattered comments found throughout Derrida's discussion of Nietzsche in, for example, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Editions Galiléé, 1994). Rather than simply an isolated comment in an obscure interview, I hope to show throughout this paper that Derrida's claims about Nietzsche's critique of democracy resonate with a view that he held at least from the late 80s.

for either Derrida or Nietzsche to adopt this critical position? Let us take for example Derrida's analysis of sovereignty in *Rogues*. According to Derrida, democratic sovereignty has a problematic role in democratic states insofar as its legitimating moment – polling day – is always at a distance from the moment in which a legitimate government exercises its power. For Derrida, this highlights the need for democratic authorities to perpetually repeat the process by which they come by that authority; an elected party can only have a temporary claim to power in a democracy, and at the very least must have another electoral mandate after a term, meaning that even an elected body cannot have the 'last word' in democratic politics.<sup>8</sup> Derrida's phrase 'democracy to come' refers to that feature of democracy that denies anyone the last word and requires that democratic politics remain on ongoing process.<sup>9</sup> Thus to say that Derrida, or Nietzsche, are critical of democracy in the name of a democracy to come, is to say that they are critical of the values championed under the name democracy in defence of the unending process that constitutes 'democracy to come'. Derrida's claim is, then, that Nietzsche defends the value of unending revision, and that this is a democratic value.

This claim in the 'Nietzsche and the Machine' interview is coupled with a claim about how Nietzsche understands his place in history and in particular his relation to the future of Europe. Nietzsche's orientation toward the future, we are told, is of a particular, 'messianic' kind, and it is this feature of Nietzsche's work that Derrida takes to be democratic.<sup>10</sup> What, then, does Derrida mean when he claims that Nietzsche's work is 'messianic'? To be messianic is to refuse to think of the future in terms of a finite set of possibilities, each with a pre-determinable character ('I don't know for sure if it will happen, but if it does I know what it will look like') and each with calculable probabilities. To be messianic is to hope for an unanticipated different future state of affairs;<sup>11</sup> this attitude affirms a transformation that alters

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<sup>8</sup> Hence Derrida's obsession with taking turns and rounds of voting in the earlier sections of *Voyous* (Paris: Editions Galiléé, 2003); see in particular *Rogues*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 6-41.

<sup>9</sup> For Derrida, this is an observation about what it is for something to be democratic, and thus extends not only to the legitimate authority of an elected party but also the legitimacy of the election process and more broadly the structure of a democratic state. In other words, for the process to be democratic in the same way that a party is democratically elected, that process must also be constantly open to revision. It is the broad scope of Derrida's claims about what it is for something to be democratic that gives him the resources for an account of *inter alia* a democratic orientation to the future. (I am grateful to Peter Dews for raising this issue).

<sup>10</sup> 'The messianic is heterogeneous to messianism in the precise sense that the messianic is indeterminable. Messianism will saturate the absence of horizon by turning it into a horizon. Not only would I want to show this through a fairly abstract analysis...but less abstract, more immediately, I would want to show the difference in, for example, the *tone* of Nietzsche, which is prophetic and messianic.' *Negotiations*, 227.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*: 'all the predicates that seem to me to make up the concept of messianicity – annunciation of an unpredictable future, relation to the other, affirmation, promise, revolution, justice, and so on'. Cf. *Donner la Mort* (Paris: Editions Galiléé, 1993) translated by David Willis as *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 54: 'We tremble in that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past... to a future that cannot be anticipated; anticipated but unpredictable; *apprehended*, but, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely *as* unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached *as* unapproachable.'

our situation or circumstances in a way that is not only unpredictable (in the way that the roll of dice is not predictable with certainty beyond a probability of 0.16) but that is presently indeterminable and unintelligible. In other words, our thought would be messianic were it to value and affirm changes that we believe cannot be understood until they take place.

It is tempting to think of unintelligible change as “authentic” simply in the sense that it is a more radical change, but Derrida seems to have something else in mind. The kind of future that a messianic Nietzsche hopes for is in Derrida’s words ‘the very condition of the future constituting messianism [hope for a future we can understand before it happens]’.<sup>12</sup> Thus Derrida maintains that Nietzsche, as a messianic thinker, is concerned with a kind of future that is more fundamental to our experience of change than those changes that are intelligible before they occur. I take Derrida’s suggestion here to be that our regular ability to distinguish a finite set of future possibilities is made possible by more fundamental changes in the way we see the world; changes in the way we think, feel, experience and behave. We might distinguish on the one hand the transition from die-in-hand to rolled-a-6 (intelligible change), from on the other hand the transition from an experience of a six sided stone as just that, to ‘discovering’ that if we number these sides then we can base complex games on how this stone lands when I throw it.<sup>13</sup> The range of things I can foresee happening with a six-sided stone will be characterised by how I experience it; if I understand it simply as a stone, then I might predict that one day it might be used to build a small house, or put together with other small stones in a bag to fashion some kind of blunt instrument or weight. If I undergo a change in the way I experience this object, I no longer experience it with this set of possibilities but with others (the range of numbers I might roll in the context of a game). In short, the set of possibilities intelligible to me is conditioned by the more radical changes that have already happened to the way the world appears to me. The important point to make here is that while I understand the stone as just a stone, ‘rolling a 6’ cannot make sense to me; such an event is unpredictable not because I am not sure that it will happen, but I because I do not even know what it would mean for it to happen.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Negotiations*, 227: ‘The messianic concerns a notion of the future that precedes – is the very condition of – the future constituting messianism.’

<sup>13</sup> The word “discover” might of course imply that using a six sided stone as a die constitutes the realisation of a potential of the stone. This would be eschewed by Derrida for a number of reasons; but for the purposes of this discussion, it should be enough to say that the kind of fundamental change that Derrida is concerned with must be in principle unintelligible before it occurs. Talking of this in terms of the realisation of a potential can be misleading, insofar as it may imply that “rolling a 6” has in principle been intelligible for as long as six sided stones have existed, and in turn intelligible for as long as there has been matter that could have potentially taken the form of a six sided stone. This would run contrary to Derrida’s insistence that such a possibility is not ever-present. My thanks go to Steve Gormley for raising this.

<sup>14</sup> This alludes to an interesting question about history that would follow from this way of thinking about change over time: while the “stone-is-just-a-stone individual” (SI) could not understand the possibilities involved in rolling a die, could the “dice individual”(DI) know and understand the possibilities available to SI? If we maintain an Hegelian view of history, in which previous ways of understanding are subsumed under subsequent ways, it appears that DI might be able to retrospectively understand the

The messianic tone of Derrida's Nietzsche consists of an affirmation of this more profoundly different, unpredictable future, if by affirmation we mean valuing this kind of future over the manageable possibilities that constitute our usual understanding of the passage of time. In other words, Derrida's Nietzsche sees fundamental change in the way I experience the world as the proper object of orientation for those of us who wish to consider the future. Whereas for most, thinking about the future involves thinking about that which will happen "next Wednesday", "in an hour", or "after the baby is born",<sup>15</sup> Derrida's Nietzsche will maintain that comporting oneself towards the future requires a comportment towards that which lies outside the set of currently intelligible possibilities.

But what does it mean to describe this orientation to the future as democratic? As outlined briefly above, Derrida's notion of democracy to come refers to what he believes to be the open-ended character of democracy; democracy in practice requires that we perpetually revisit our political decisions to establish new electoral mandates, and so a final decision, a last word, is never found in a democracy worthy of the name. In accordance with this analysis of democracy, to espouse democratic values, or to have a democratic attitude, is for Derrida to appreciate the value of this open-ended process and the importance of a practice that resists the attraction of having the last word or coming to a conclusion. If our hopes for the future are informed by this democratic value, we will affirm radical changes in the way we think and hope for a future that poses challenges to our decisions.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, this democratic attitude would value the kind of transformation over time that would change the very possibilities open to us. This might be captured in the simple accommodation of change through a perpetual revisiting of an electoral mandate; but in a more profound sense, Derrida maintains that being democratic means

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possibilities for SI. One might then argue that there is an epistemological asymmetry to history; SI cannot understand DI, whereas DI can understand SI. Alternatively, one might argue that an alteration to the way I experience an object requires not only this narrow alteration, but an upheaval to the environment in which that object appears and perhaps a total change in the way I understand the world. If I undergo such a radical transformation in my understanding, then it would seem that this necessitates a complete rewrite of history; "stone" is reinterpreted in terms of what I experience as a die, and becomes "potential die" or "stone before we used it as a die". We might then argue that this reinterpretation makes DI's understanding of the historical uses of "potential dice" incommensurable with SI's understanding, making it impossible for DI to understand the possibilities available to SI.

<sup>15</sup> Thus discursive understanding of time is not here restricted to time understood as the ticking hands of a clock. To conceive of a usual conception of time so narrowly would not, I believe, be very helpful; we undeniably structure a large part of our lives using a calendar and a watch, but we also structure our lives using less calculable temporal events, such as the birth of a child ("we'll spend more time with our family once the baby is born"), the changing of governments ("our lives started to deteriorate when the coalition took office") or the loss of a certain amount of weight ("when I reach my 'target weight' I'll change my diet").

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Rogues, 91: "The *to* of the "to come" wavers between imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient *perhaps* of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come)." It is no coincidence, I think, that we here see Derrida reference the '*perhaps*' that constitutes so much of his discussion of Nietzsche in *Politiques de l'amitié*.

valuing an unforeseen moment when we rethink or reappraise what possibilities are intelligible to us. In this latter sense, Derrida describes an attitude that affirms an upheaval of the way we experience the world. And according to Derrida, this attitude towards the future, when rendered as a political regime, has its closest approximation in a democracy. Put more succinctly, the Derridean democratic attitude towards the future would be a political articulation of the messianic attitude toward the future that we have discussed above. And if Derrida is right about Nietzsche's 'messianic tone', then he may have good reason for maintaining that Nietzsche evidences a democratic orientation toward the future.

## II

We can give more content to this notion of a democratic attitude to the future by looking at the way Derrida thinks this attitude is manifest in Nietzsche's work. In 'Nietzsche and the Machine' Derrida lists a number of works that he maintains exhibit a 'messianic tone'; he finds such a tone in, for instance, the following passage from *Ecce Homo*:

Seeing that before long I must confront humanity with the most difficult demand that has ever been made of it, it seems indispensable to me to say *who I am*. Really, one should know it, for I have not left myself 'without testimony'. But the disproportion between the greatness of my task and the *smallness* of my contemporaries has found expression in the fact that one has neither heard nor even seen me. I live on my own credit<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche claims that his own era has failed to understand him and that as a result of this he has had to live on his own credit. The understanding that Nietzsche seeks, the understanding he seems to need as some sort of fiscal endorsement, backing or funding (credit), has come from no-one but himself. According to Derrida, Nietzsche needs this credit for 'His own identity – the one he means to declare and which, being so out of proportion with his contemporaries, has nothing to do with what they know by this name'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, at the time Nietzsche writes *Ecce Homo*, the only reader who has understood him has been Nietzsche himself. This identity has been endorsed and supported (economically or otherwise) only by Nietzsche; it is not 'by right of some contract drawn up with his contemporaries'. This leads Derrida to claim that the contract that ensures the support needed for Nietzsche's identity is the 'unheard-of contract he has drawn up with himself'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche *Ecce Homo* trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, [1908] 2004), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'oreille de l'autre: Otobiographies, transferts, traductions* (Montreal: VLB Editeur, 1982) translated by Christie McDonald as *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, transference, translation* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



Nietzsche's contemporaries have failed to act either as his creditor (unable to properly understand and invest themselves in engaging with Nietzsche's texts) or as his debtor (i.e. have been unable to properly learn from and be indebted to Nietzsche's texts). We could say that the credit agreement that Nietzsche draws up lacks a countersignature, as Derrida implies in *Politics of Friendship*:

my [Nietzsche's] readers to come, who will be my readers only if you become new philosophers – that is, if you know how to read me – in other words, if you can think what I write in my stead, and if you know how to countersign in advance or how to prepare yourself to countersign<sup>20</sup>

Derrida describes the figures capable of reading (and properly comprehending) Nietzsche's text as those who are able to countersign the contract that constitutes Nietzsche's work. Nietzsche's texts, along the lines of this reading, are effectively open contracts, a kind of blank cheque, signed by the author and awaiting the countersignature of a coming 'new philosopher' capable of properly understanding (investing in, perhaps acknowledging a debt to) Nietzsche's thought.<sup>21</sup> In other words, and according to Derrida's reading, Nietzsche's works go beyond the comprehension of Nietzsche's contemporaries and effectively address themselves to a future, 'new philosopher'. This philosopher of the future is the figure who will be capable of comprehending, learning from and countersigning Nietzsche's contract. Until then, Nietzsche must live on his own credit.

How does Nietzsche's address to a future readership manifest a democratic attitude toward the future? Nietzsche undoubtedly desired a radical change in his contemporary culture. For Derrida, the cultural revolution Nietzsche desired is radical insofar as it alters the horizon of intelligible possibilities available to Nietzsche and his contemporaries. Thus for Nietzsche's comportment to his readership to be messianic, his intended readership would have to be deferred to an era after a radical change in European culture. Most importantly, the full details of this change itself and the set of intelligible possibilities that is available to these profoundly different 'new philosophers' would have to be unintelligible to Nietzsche at the time of writing; the right readers are located beyond what is presently within his capacity to understand.

If we recall the die example used above, we could say that just as experiencing a stone as just a stone means that I cannot understand the possibility 'rolling a 6', so Nietzsche cannot understand the possibilities available to his future readership.

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<sup>20</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 41. I have stipulated that 'my readers to come' are Nietzsche's readers; however, while it is clear that Derrida wishes to assert this of Nietzsche and how Nietzsche perceives his readership, there may be an argument for claiming that Derrida too understands his audience in a similar way. If this were the case, statements about 'my readers to come' may well refer to both Derrida and Derrida's Nietzsche.

<sup>21</sup> As Derrida points out, not only is *Ecce Homo*'s preface signed nominally (F.N.) but the work is further signed with a date: 'The page is dated. To date is to sign.' (*The Ear of the Other*, 11). As per the usual format of a contract, Nietzsche not only signs but also dates his work.

And to take up a ‘messianic attitude’ in this context would be to value precisely this kind of reader. If Derrida is to attribute this kind of attitude to Nietzsche, he must locate it in exactly the kind of open-ended style that his open contract metaphor is designed to underline; if Derrida’s Nietzsche had anticipated the kind of reader he affirms, it would be inconsistent to maintain that this same Nietzsche is ‘messianic’.

Derrida’s focus on Nietzsche’s credit metaphor is clearly underpinned by a distinctive way of understanding the cultural revolution that Nietzsche called a ‘revaluation of values.’ According to Derrida the philosophers of the future who Nietzsche awaits are different not only in the sense that they cognitively evaluate the world in a significantly different way (they maintain a morality or table of values sufficiently different from a Christian- or slave-morality) but in the sense that the very set of future possibilities that are intelligible to them are fundamentally different *and unintelligible to Nietzsche himself*. The range of possibilities that they are able to consider is wholly distinct from the set of possibilities that Nietzsche himself can understand. Affirming the arrival of such a radically different generation would mean affirming a way of understanding the world and its possibilities that Nietzsche himself could not at the time of writing take up.<sup>22</sup> In other words, affirming such a different generation would amount to hoping for the arrival of a way of being in the world that is not open to being understood by preceding generations.

### III

This leads us to a particular problem for Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche. The problem concerns whether one can ever write in a way that addresses such a radically different future readership. If the messianic tone of Nietzsche’s untimely writing is supposed to *address* a readership yet to come, wouldn’t this require that Nietzsche transcend his era to share in the mode of thought found in the philosophers of the future? Does communicability between Nietzsche and his future readers presuppose some common linguistic or conceptual elements between writer and reader? And if this were the case, would this not require that Nietzsche anticipate that which, according to Derrida, precludes anticipation? In this section I will deal exclusively with this problem and Derrida’s answer to this problem. In the final section (IV), I will raise concerns that I believe Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche does not address.

This problem, as I understand it, hinges on whether we claim that Nietzsche needs to share a way of thinking with his readership. If Nietzsche is to address himself to a certain kind of reader, must Nietzsche share some discursive content or

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<sup>22</sup> And possibly a way of understanding that Nietzsche would never be able to take up. One might legitimately ask of Derrida whether the profound change he associates with a democratic attitude toward the future can be located within a lifetime. In other words, can Nietzsche (or anyone) experience such a change to the possibilities he has available to his understanding, and affirm a profoundly different “Nietzsche”, or does his connection with his own history of contemporary culture require him to affirm a whole other generation – a problem Nietzsche himself was very aware of in considering the possibility of being ‘untimely’?

form – perhaps a shared semantics or grammar – with that kind of reader? If we answer yes, then there would seem to be something incongruous about claiming that Nietzsche both endorses a way of thinking that is wholly different to anything he can presently understand, and that he shares in this way of thinking. Derrida will claim that Nietzsche need not and indeed does not share a way of thinking with those future readers he values above his contemporaries. Rather, Derrida maintains that Nietzsche’s proper reader must in each case be singular, relating to Nietzsche’s work in a unique way.

Derrida raised analogous concerns in his analysis of philosophies of friendship. According to Derrida, Nietzsche had questioned this tradition by challenging the value of a bond between similar persons and raising the possibility of an alternative mode of friendship.<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche’s critique engenders a very different approach to friendship that is not based on commonality, shared interests or characteristics, or even proximity. Thus Derrida maintains that Nietzsche’s ‘friends’ are those unpredictable readers of the future we have discussed in relation to Nietzsche’s open contract.

For Derrida, Nietzsche’s readers are ‘friends of solitude’ who engage in a friendship ‘without common measure, reciprocity or equality’.<sup>24</sup> The inversion of the alleged canonical understanding of friendship here is I think clear enough; Derrida’s Nietzsche values those who co-exist in a way that maintains their interpersonal disparity rather than those who come together as a result of their common perspective.<sup>25</sup> However, as Derrida quite rightly notes, a collection of individuals who hold nothing in common and who evade proximity, equality, and mutuality would seem to undermine all that we would usually associate with the bonds of friendship, and perhaps has little right to claim even a radically different application of the word ‘friendship’.<sup>26</sup> What alternative notion could retain a bond of friendship, love, or community while endorsing solitude and distance? And similarly: in what sense could Nietzsche address himself to a readership with which he has nothing in common?

The notion of a community without a bond of similarity, fraternity, consanguinity, or compatriotism is, as Derrida acknowledges, worryingly close to an untenable contradiction. This notion, which Derrida refers to as a ‘community without community,’ comes under much scrutiny in *Politics of Friendship* as he examines the possibility of an alternative way of constructing social bonds that would accommodate ‘friends of

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<sup>23</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studeinausgabe in 15 Bänden* Edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 9:3 [98], 1880 (my translation): ‘The more the feeling of unity with others gains the upper hand, the more people become uniform, and the more all differences are seen as immoral. This is needed to create the sand of humanity: all very equal, very small, very round, very amicable, very boring. Christianity and democracy more than anything have driven man to being sand.’

<sup>26</sup> ‘Why still call this ‘friendship’ except in a misuse of language and a diversion of a semantic tradition?’, *Politics of Friendship*, 35.

solitude'.<sup>27</sup> It will pay us to spend a little time considering this phrase 'community without community' and its importance in Derrida's study of friendship before returning to the problem at hand (we will see that Derrida's answer to the questions I raised at the beginning of this section is inextricable from his understanding of a 'community without community').

Derrida owes the phrase 'community without community' to Georges Bataille, who addressed an absence of communitarian thought felt by many French intellectuals of the time.<sup>28</sup> Picked up later by Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and adopted once more by Maurice Blanchot in *The Unavowable Community* (which was no less a response to Nancy's work than to Bataille), the phrase signified for Bataille a profound dissatisfaction with contemporary political groups and resonates with an ever increasing demand for a seemingly impossible non-institutionalised community. Blanchot recognises that this frustration was partly a reaction to the established notion of reciprocity in social relations. In Blanchot's words, the shortcomings of a 'Same with Same' model of the communal bond reflected a need to incorporate the possibility of 'the Other as irreducible' in interpersonal relations. For Blanchot this raises difficult questions for communist philosophy in particular; the challenge for communism as Blanchot sees it is to reconcile communism and individualism, an interrelation of contradictory sentiments of 'absolute immanence' (the homogenous masses dissolved into work) and an individual's 'inalienable rights'. The question that Blanchot thus addresses is whether we can think of a community that does not undermine the individuality of the 'irreducible Other'.<sup>29</sup>

Blanchot's discussion of community was in part a response to Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, which was itself inspired by Bataille. *The Inoperative Community* identifies a nostalgic desire in the 'community without community' theme; this nostalgia, for Nancy, pines for something that has been effaced by institutionalised versions of companionship (political parties, for instance). Nancy's use of the word 'community' refers to this element of our communal experience that is damaged or covered over by institutional delineation or legislation of communal bonds (the determination, for example, of the conditions of entry into a certain community). In an effort to dissociate his theory of community from traditional thought on the nature of community, Nancy suggests that community can be understood as being, insofar as it is not reducible to a totality of entities (and certainly not the enumeration of individuals in a group) or to an individual entity (what Blanchot calls 'a supra-individuality').<sup>30</sup> In this sense, community is for Nancy a relational space that precedes

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<sup>27</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 47n.15.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this, see Pierre Joris' preface in Maurice Blanchot *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1984) translated by Pierre Joris as *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), xv-xx.

<sup>29</sup> Blanchot (1988), 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1983) translated by Peter Connor as *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 7.

our articulation of what we think is shared in a community. According to Nancy, different cultures and societies have attempted to understand this primordial origin of communal experience through a certain hegemonic narrative. Nancy calls this form of story-telling ‘myth’. For Nancy, myth has historically engendered the conceptual reflexivity of our societies and has led us to believe that we have understood what constitutes the bonds of our communities. For Nancy, however, community is that which always exceeds our attempts to explain our communal origins; community takes shape not in myth itself but in the interruptions of myth, or rather in the instances when we find that the constitutional delineation of the conditions of our community becomes questionable.<sup>31</sup>

An important caveat for Nancy’s appropriation of the term ‘community’ is his rejection of the term ‘individuality’ in favour of ‘singularity’.<sup>32</sup> For Nancy, community concerns singularity and precedes the intersubjective bonds that connect individuals. In a similar sense, Blanchot’s account of ‘the Other’ as singular individual incommensurable with a homogenous collective demands respect for the irreducibility of singularity. Finally, Derrida brings this issue of singularity to bear on our models of friendship, our models of democratic social interaction, and our models of the relation between author and reader. Blanchot’s ‘irreducible Other’, in the context of the disparity between communism and individualism, and Nancy’s inoperative community, contingent not on a myth of common origin but on the deconstruction of this myth, are both attempts to understand the problems that singularity raises for a model or paradigm of community.

Returning to the problem raised in this section: how would Derrida explain Nietzsche’s ability to address himself to a radically different readership? The problem arises when we want to communicate content in the form of a book or essay to a reader who cannot share my way of thinking. If we discuss this with particular regard to a cultural revolution that would constitute the ‘revaluation of values’, a revolution Nietzsche associates with ‘coming philosophers’,<sup>33</sup> we could say that Derrida’s Nietzsche faces a problem if he intends to prescribe to these future philosophers certain ways of proceeding with this revolution. If I ask or demand that you perform X, X being one of a set of possibilities available to you, then we must share a mutual understanding of X i.e. X must be within both my range and your range of intelligible possibilities. As discussed above, this kind of mutual understanding is not the kind of relation that Derrida sees in Nietzsche’s addresses to future readers.

This would, I suggest, be a problem for Derrida’s reading if he claimed that Nietzsche both valued an unanticipated readership and addressed prescriptions to this readership. However, while the former is central to his reading – indeed, it is

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy (1991), 43-70.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy (1991), 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* translated by Walter Kaufmann as *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, [1886] 1989), §2.

that which Derrida thinks makes Nietzsche democratic – the latter is not a part of Derrida’s interpretation; Derrida’s Nietzsche does not prescribe substantive guidance to his readers to come. The task that Derrida faces thus becomes elucidating an alternative way in which Nietzsche, or any author, could orient himself to future readers. This is I believe the problem that occupied Derrida’s treatment of Nietzsche in *Politics of Friendship* and led him to consider what a ‘community without community’ would be. Derrida’s answer, inspired by Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, is that one can value that which is unique to a person, and that one can do this through hoping for moments when our established conditions for joining our community are challenged. In the words of the tradition in which Derrida places himself, one can value ‘singularity’ or ‘the Other’ rather than principles that determine the sufficient conditions for being my friend.

Analogous to this analysis of community or friendship, Derrida will assert of Nietzsche that his alternative to the bond of commonality between writer and reader is to value readers who read his works an irreducibly unique way. The ‘friends of solitude’ that Derrida identifies as Nietzsche’s intended readers are said to be valued not for their capacity to understand Nietzsche’s work in the way Nietzsche himself did, but for their capacity for relating in a singular way to the content of Nietzsche’s writing. If Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche is accurate – an exegetical issue to which I will turn in the final section – then Nietzsche does not require a common understanding between himself and his awaited readers. Instead, Derrida’s Nietzsche values those readers who will appropriate his thought in a way that breaks with traditional reception of his work – singular readings that challenge paradigmatic accounts of Nietzsche’s thought. According to Derrida, Nietzsche’s intended readers, equated in *Politics of Friendship* with his ‘friends of solitude’, are sufficiently unique to remain heterogeneous to models of how-to-read-Nietzsche, even a model that may have originated with Nietzsche himself.<sup>34</sup> Derrida’s Nietzsche, then, is not so much concerned with the successful communication of content as he is with the way he his read, and whether his readers are singular in their appreciation of his work.

With Derrida’s full account of Nietzsche’s readership in view, I want to return to Derrida’s claim that Nietzsche is democratic. I explained in section one that Derrida thinks that Nietzsche is democratic insofar as he values perpetual revision of our way of viewing the world and appreciates the importance of resisting having the last word in philosophical, political or moral discussion. More specifically, Derrida thinks that Nietzsche’s comportment to the future is democratic insofar as it affirms such radical cultural transformation that Nietzsche cannot himself prescribe those changes in advance; being democratic, for Derrida, means hoping for a time when not only our decisions are revised but the very possibilities that are open to us have altered.

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<sup>34</sup> They are ‘friends of solitude’ in the sense that they cannot be accurately grouped together with other readers – they stand alone.

This orientation to the future, for Derrida, is evidenced in the way Nietzsche thinks of his readership. Derrida's Nietzsche intends to be read by those new philosophers who exceed Nietzsche's present understanding; Nietzsche affirms a reader who not only has a different philosophical or moral perspective, but has a transformed range of possible interpretations of his work at her disposal. For Derrida, Nietzsche's orientation to his readers is such that Nietzsche resists having the last word on his own work, and that he affirms interpretations that challenge established conventions regarding the meaning of Nietzsche's writing. In short, Derrida maintains that Nietzsche has a characteristically democratic orientation to the future reception of his critique of modern Europe.

#### IV

My aim in this paper has been to reconstruct a reading of Nietzsche offered by Derrida in order to understand a) his novel interpretation of the political implications of Nietzsche's critique of modernity b) what it would mean for Nietzsche, or indeed anyone, to have a democratic orientation to the future and c) how such a thing might be possible for an author addressing future readers. Most of this paper has been dedicated to explaining Derrida's contribution regarding a) and b). With regards to c), I have addressed one potential problem with valuing a radically different reader and suggested that Derrida has an answer to this problem. What I have not done is argued that Derrida's reading of Nietzsche is accurate. I have concerns about his reading that have kept me from doing this, and I want to explain these concerns in this final section. These concerns will also point to a fourth issue which I also have not yet dealt with in this paper: d) whether a democratic orientation to the future (at least how Derrida describes it) might be valuable.

Derrida's reading of Nietzsche and democracy has the benefit of incorporating the virtues of other democratic readings of Nietzsche without facing the same problems as those readings. Others who read Nietzsche as democratic emphasise his resistance to dogmatic law with universal applicability; it is important to Nietzsche that individuals are not dissolved into a homogeneous mass or 'herd,' and accordingly that our ethical codes do not erode the singularity of creative individuals. But this alone does not warrant reading Nietzsche as democratic, as the liberation of great individuals from a herd mentality is not only possible in a democracy. We might say that pluralism is an underdetermined inference from Nietzsche's objection to herd homogeneity. In fact, Nietzsche claims that great individuals have been supported by hierarchical societies, suggesting that an aristocratic 'pathos of distance' has been necessary to the development of an ethic of self-overcoming that drives the cultivation of creative individuals (*Beyond Good and Evil* §257). Nietzsche's resistance to social homogeneity appears to lead him more in the direction of aristocracy than democratic pluralism.

Derrida's own version of this reading acknowledges this same worry about homogeneity in Nietzsche. But Derrida's Nietzsche responds to modern herd mentality not by advocating a democratic pluralism, but by affirming singular future readers

of his work. Derrida's Nietzsche is not democratic in virtue of his support for a pluralistic society, but is democratic in virtue of his support for heterogeneity in the future of Europe. In this way Derrida's reading is able to locate democratic values in Nietzsche's style and hopes for the future, and incorporates Nietzsche's valorisation of individuality, while avoiding the underdetermination problem facing those who infer pluralism from Nietzsche's valorisation of individuality.

However, Nietzsche's claim that social hierarchy is indispensable to strong or healthy culture is potentially a difficult problem for those, including Derrida, who want to read any democratic sentiment in Nietzsche. Many of those who have reacted critically to the pro-democratic Nietzsche literature have drawn attention to Nietzsche's anti-egalitarianism, particularly Nietzsche's lament of the decline of pre-modern aristocratic orders of rank.<sup>35</sup> Any reading of Nietzsche as democratic must undoubtedly account for these strong anti-egalitarian sentiments. The question we must ask of Derrida is whether the form of egalitarianism entailed by a democracy to come (that which Derrida ascribes to Nietzsche) contradicts Nietzsche's objections to the levelling instincts of modern egalitarianism.

Derrida's democracy to come does entail a particular kind of equality. If Derrida is right, then Nietzsche foregoes attempts to determine in advance what constitutes a good and a bad reading of him. If he were to do otherwise, according to Derrida's reading, then he would fail to genuinely affirm the value of singular interpretations yet to come – he would be making proscriptions, and running into the problem highlighted in section IV. This refusal to evaluate in advance constitutes a particular mode of egalitarianism. However, this kind of egalitarianism is distinct from the homogenising equality that Nietzsche objected to. Derrida's critique of Nancy in *Rogues* explicitly states the former's commitment to a distinct mode of equality:

As soon as everyone...is equally (*homoiōs*) free, equality becomes an integral part of freedom and is thus no longer calculable. This equality in freedom no longer has anything to do with numerical equality or equality according to worth, proportion of *logos*. It is itself incalculable and incommensurable equality; it is the unconditional condition of freedom, its sharing, if you will.<sup>36</sup>

Derrida distinguishes the equality that affirms singularity from an equality that renders individuals calculable. The latter is understood as an equality in virtue of a common measure, a metric applicable to all by which we can calculate the worth of individuals; we are equal insofar as we are allotted the same value according to this common metric. The version of equality that Derrida repudiates is also the kind of equality that Nietzsche criticises in his best known anti-egalitarian passages. Nietzsche's distaste for the "democratization of Europe" focuses on the homogenising effect of the dissolution of middle age chivalric or aristocratic orders. In *Beyond Good and Evil* §242, for example, Nietzsche tells us 'Europeans are becoming more similar to each other' as they become 'increasingly independent of any *determinate* milieu.' Nietzsche's problem with this is not with equality per se, but with an equality

<sup>35</sup> See for instance Thomas Hurka, 'Nietzsche: Perfectionist' in *Nietzsche and Morality* ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>36</sup> Rogues, 49.



that brings with it a herd mentality and precludes the development of the kind of great individuals he finds in ‘healthy aristocracies’. Derrida would no doubt agree that there is something wrong with herd-like equality, either among friends or among a political community. There is no disagreement between Derrida and Nietzsche with regard to this kind of equality.

The same cannot be said, however, for the kind of egalitarianism that is integral to democracy to come. This alternative notion of equality might best be understood as a negatively defined equality; rather than ascribing a positive equal value to all, the egalitarianism of democracy to come foregoes evaluative comparison between individuals, and thereby precludes positive statements of inequality (X is less valuable than Y). In a word, we could say that the democratic orientation endorsed by Derrida is *indiscriminate* with regards to that which is yet to come. To determine in advance our trajectory into the future, to discriminate between better and worse ways of proceeding, would according to Derrida introduce a future horizon that shuts out singular possibilities. And to do this would, for Derrida, be undemocratic.

This indiscriminate hope for any future change is, I submit, not something that Nietzsche would endorse. As mentioned above, the value of hierarchy in Nietzsche (most often discussed in terms of Nietzsche’s supposedly aristocratic politics) has often been cited against attempts to ‘democratise’ Nietzsche. The significance of hierarchy for Nietzsche can of course be read in many ways, and presents itself in a number of forms in Nietzsche’s later works. One such way is a hierarchy of drives internal to the ‘soul’; having one drive ‘come out on top’ in order to dominate all others impulses and inclinations internal to the self can above all else be a strong motivation to activity.<sup>37</sup>

The question of what conditions help motivate creative activity is undoubtedly of great importance to Nietzsche. With his contemporaries’ foundational belief systems ebbing away, much of Nietzsche’s late concerns are preoccupied with what he sees as the miserably insufficient attempts of modernity to continue in a positive and constructive way. Neither the utilitarianism of the ‘last man’ (among others, according

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<sup>37</sup> In the same way that, as suggested in Nietzsche’s earlier work, a pluralistic culture can only be a strong culture when under an overarching and unifying principle. This is especially prominent in his account of Wagner’s development as a cultural revolutionary capable of reviving tragedy and uniting the future of Germany under a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. See Friedrich Nietzsche *Unzeitgemasse Betrachtungen IV* translated by R.J. Hollingdale as *Untimely Meditations IV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1876] 1997); for an account of Wagner’s philosophical influence on Nietzsche’s early hopes for a unified culture, see Julian Young ‘Richard Wagner and the Birth of *The Birth of Tragedy*’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 16:2 (2008), 217-45; and for an example of Nietzsche’s mature articulation of this sentiment, see Nietzsche [1886], §260. Nietzsche’s account of unifying a pluralistic culture through an overarching principle bears much resemblance to his celebration of unified individuals. For recent discussion of this theme in Nietzsche see Ken Gemes ‘Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy, and the Sovereign Individual’, in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy* ed. Ken Gemes and Simon May (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Paul Katsafanas ‘The Concept of Unified Agency in Nietzsche, Plato and Schiller,’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming), Simon May ‘Nietzsche and the Free Self’ in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy* and Robert Pippin ‘How to Overcome Oneself: Nietzsche on Freedom’ in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*.

to Nietzsche, Mill) nor the pessimism of the nihilist (among others, Schopenhauer), suffice as reactions to the collapse of a theologically grounded ethical horizon. These two ways of proceeding lack an urgent desire for upheaval, transformation and improvement precluded either by the conservatism of the last man (maximising one's happiness in accordance with currently available petty pursuits) or the resignation of the nihilist (improvement is not possible).

The problem with the messianic attitude of democracy to come is that it cannot give the normative grounds for actively transforming the current situation; it lacks, we might say, the capacity to motivate present action. Hope for a radically different future can at best motivate me to clear the ground for a cultural revolution, but gives me no guidance as to how to actively involve myself in this revolution.<sup>38</sup> Derrida will insist that the democracy to come places an urgent demand to act on us, and at times is at pains to deny a quietistic effect of deconstruction.<sup>39</sup> Derrida may well be warranted in thinking this, but it is not the case that Nietzsche would agree, and by extension it is not the case that Nietzsche himself thinks that a democratic attitude toward the future is the right response to modern nihilism.

Nietzsche's emphasis on the value of hierarchy, and the decline of social hierarchy, suggests to us that a lack of discrimination is precisely what is nihilistic about late modernity. If the death of God means a dearth of normative authority, and with it the absence of cultural distinctions between right and wrong or good and bad, then for Nietzsche an indiscriminate hope for the future is no more than a symptom of late modernity's lack of normativity. In short, Derrida's democracy to come would for Nietzsche be just another symptom of modern nihilism; doing no more than hoping for something different is a manifestation of nihilism, not the way Nietzsche wants us to respond to it.

Derrida does appreciate the bind that Nietzsche himself is in. Nietzsche is aware that he is a product of his own time to some extent; his strong desire to be untimely (take, for instance, the way in which Nietzsche takes pride in being misunderstood in by his contemporaries) speaks to Nietzsche's frustration with the fact that he is writing in a time of decadence and cannot help but be somehow sullied by this. Nietzsche's problem then is that he could not trust his own revaluation of values. This cultural revolution must be left to those who have made a clean break

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<sup>38</sup> This criticism of messianism will be familiar to those who have charged Marxism with the same problem. Marxists have repeatedly tussled over whether Marx's teleological theory of history asks us to prepare for a proletarian revolution, or bring it about ourselves. In other words, do we hope for a future so different to our own that we would sully it by involving ourselves in its creation? Or does the creation of communism require action in the present to realise that future?

<sup>39</sup> 'My pointed reference to urgency is meant to suggest that in the necessarily finite time of politics and thus of democracy, the democracy to come certainly does not mean the right to defer, even if it be in the name of some regulative Idea, the experience or even less the injunction of democracy... The to-come of democracy is also, though without presence, the *hic et nunc* of urgency, of the injunction as absolute urgency. Even when democracy makes one wait or makes one wait for it,' *Rogues*, 29.

from late modern nihilism. Derrida's reading acknowledge that Nietzsche can do no more than wait and hope for those who have made this clean break. But the problem with Derrida is that he has turned this messianic hope – for Nietzsche, the only option in an era of degeneration and empty values – into something valuable in itself. This is, I submit, where Derrida and Nietzsche disagree on the value of democracy.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For comments and suggestions I am grateful to Pete Bloom, Steve Gormley, David McNeill and Peter Dews.