**Djokovic, the Australian Open, Idiots and Cov-idiots: What would Nietzsche say?**

Dmitri Safronov

Had any of the players who competed for the inaugural tennis grand slam of 2022 in Melbourne been complete (i.e. sovereign, self-governing) individuals, they would have declared the ‘AO’ boycott before the tournament started. Not only because of Djokovic, but also because of Renata Voráčová. Not only out of the camaraderie with the two fellow members of the travelling circus which professional tennis (along with all other professional ‘spectator’ sports) has become, courtesy of the ‘contemptible money economy’. Nor because of supporting Djokovic’s undoubtedly hard and inevitably controversial choice not to get vaccinated. Not even because the famed AO had fallen easy prey to inconspicuous electioneering by the incumbent government. The *principled individuals* would have abandoned the tournament in light of what the cases of Djokovic and Voráčová inadvertently told us about what we have become.

The boycott, however, was unthinkable. It could never happen, not in a million years. The inverse vision emphatically unfolded as part of a history adorned with the narratives of the ‘great success’, ‘uplifting finale’ and reigned ‘GOAT’ debates. To borrow the self-righteous assertion of Victorian Premier Dan Andrews, echoed by many, ‘the Australian Open was bigger than Djokovic, much bigger’. No doubt they were right, although it is less clear whether any of them thought through the repercussions of their emotional and patriotic endorsement of the AO’s hyperbole.

It is no secret that we have long since dispensed with the critical gift of unhurried and prolonged contemplation. As a result, we tend to become too wrapped up in today’s multitude of political whirlwinds, whether big or small, brief or protracted. Nietzsche warned us about the perils of foregoing the *vita contemplativa* and living, instead, ‘as if one always ’might miss out on something’. When this happens, he argued, ‘hours in which honesty is permitted’ become rare, and even when they arrive, we have no energy left for them.

Heeding Nietzsche’s warning, we might stop to ponder ‘why not’? Why wouldn’t the boycott happen, why couldn’t it, should there have been one and, most importantly, what does the highly publicised scandal around Djokovic tell us about ourselves? Admittedly, it has always been a tall order to expect athletes to act as a barometer of collective conscience. It is, however, not without precedent. Sport often ends up caught in the crossfire of politics, which has in recent decades marred and brutalised the Olympic spirit, still vaguely synonymous with the few remaining pockets of uncommercialised athletic endeavour. Still, past athletes have, on occasion, shone an uncomfortable and uncompromising light on the perils of a situation the majority might passively sanction as ‘normal’. Jesse Owens did just that in 1936.

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1 The author is triple vaccinated, lost his beloved aunt to the virus, does not hold anti-vax views, and is not a Djokovic fan.

2 This article quotes extensively from Nietzsche’s unpublished notes. These are assembled in the *Nachlass* and accessed from <http://www.nietzschesource.org>. Notes in the *Nachlass* are organised according to the year, number of the notebook, and number of the notebook entry, e.g. NF-1885(year): 2(notebook) [179] (note).


5 Cf. Nietzsche’s discussion in Nietzsche (n 3) ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’ §§4; David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer §8.

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Today, inside the fact that the boycott could never happen, hides a small but important secret. It binds us in a manner we prefer to pass over in silence even though we must speak about it. The secret is that we have firmly forgotten the original meaning of the word ‘idiot’. These days, when we casually throw around the term ‘Covid-idiot’, we refer to someone dangerously (almost offensively) weak in their mental and ethical faculties, unable to recognise the blindingly obvious benefits of getting vaccinated. In so doing, we habitually misuse the term or, to be more precise, we utilise its inverted meaning.

An ‘idiot’ (from the Greek ἱδιώτης, or ‘idioi’), however, is not at all a ‘fool’ or mentally incapacitated. Neither Aristotle, nor Dostoevsky, nor Nietzsche thought so. The root adjective ἱδιός (‘idiou’) denotes a state of affairs which is ‘not shared’ or an individual who, akin to a branch torn from the tree, is ‘disconnected’ from a larger whole, i.e. whose communitarian sensibility has been disabled. In other words, an ‘idiot’ is simply a ‘private person.’ That is, ‘idiot’ is a designation for an individual whose psychic cord—informing and enabling their sense of the ‘communal’ and the ‘collective’—has been irreparably severed, turning such fragmented human beings into ‘dividuums’. These dividuums are those who can be reassembled as the meaningless (in and of themselves) and disposable (Marx would say ‘commoditised’) cogs of new socio-economic wholes—the vast and suspectible to being fooled and manipulated, without even realising this. Private persons arranged into a ‘society’ serve as a powerful repellent of the few non-idiots from the new configuration of the polis.

Much as in ancient Athens ‘idiot’ denoted a person positioned, by choice or fortune, outside of the polis (i.e. a form of disenfranchisement) and made weaker and more vulnerable on account of such externalisation, today the same term denotes the basis on which we are re-incorporated into society—as, as idiots. Put slightly differently, we are incorporated into society as subjects who have internalised our own disenfranchisement from the community and from the communal, and therefore as inevitably of lesser value than individuals. Nietzsche would remind us that two other forms of reactive power, namely religion (meaning Christianity) and slave morality, operate according to exactly the same principle, the ‘reversal of the evaluating glance’, in terms of creating obsequious subjectivity.

Don’t get me wrong, today’s ‘private persons’ are invariably clever, educated, sophisticated and endowed with high morals. Yet, having been moulded into ‘idiots’, they have unwittingly become vulnerable and susceptible to being fooled and manipulated, without even realising this. Private persons arranged into a ‘society’ serve as a powerful repellent of the few non-idiots from the new configuration of the polis.

The behaviour and the decision-making of idiots is different from that of individuals. Idiots are powered and informed by a fundamentally different algorithm: one of constantly chasing after and maximising (but never fulfilling) the elusive personal marginal utility, in the form of the abstract notion of happiness, a ‘bubble’ that requires continual inflation. So much so, that ‘dividuums’ come to internalise and normalise their idiocy in much the same way, Nietzsche explains, as we have internalised the valuations of slave morality which inhibit individual autonomy and privilege the collective welfare of idiot as the ‘gold standard’ of good citizenship.

Tsitispas, the Greek tennis ace, said that Djokovic made ‘the majority’ look like ‘fools’, and he was absolutely right. ‘Fools’, however, in what sense? Did Tsitsipas inadvertently express the sentiment of the righteous idiotic majority that lacks an authentic collective identity which could extend beyond the mere slogans ‘expanded into a political theory’?

Echoing him, Martina Navratilova, a fellow idiot, suggested that Djokovic ‘should have taken one’ (i.e, the vaccine) ‘for open/2022/it-makes-the-majority-looks-like-fools-stefanos-tsitsipas-stfans-tsitispas-slams-novak-djokovic-for-playing-by-his-ow_sto8707032/story.shtml> accessed 15 February 2022.

15 For the purposes of this discussion, we leave out the possibility highlighted by Aristotle that an ‘idiot’ could also be a ‘god’; cf. Aristotle (n 8) 1253a 27–29. Nietzsche, likely echoing Dostoevsky, strongly disagreed with this Aristotelian possibility when discussing Jesus; cf. NF-1888:14[38]. Dostoevsky makes this point in The Idiot through the image of Prince Myshkin.

16 Cf. Nietzsche (n 10) §§45, ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ §76; Nietzsche (n 12) §14–5. Nietzsche also suggests that ‘wherever slave morality predominates, language shows a propensity for the words “good” and “stupid” to edge closer together’; Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (first published 1883, Cambridge University Press 2001) $260.}


One thing Smith overlooked and Nietzsche problematised was how the nature of collective interest may evolve following the reconfiguration of individuals into idiots and their subsequent re-incorporation into society. Nietzsche was weary that such ‘living reconfiguration of individuals into idiots and their subsequent re-

The curious thing is that all of Navratilova, Tsitsipas and the Australian ministers genuinely believed that they spoke on behalf of a community: the tennis community, the Australian nation, humankind even. Using Covid as the new universal leveller, they believed they spoke on behalf of the ‘greater good’ in the firmly Benthamite/Millean sense. The kind of ‘good’ that extends beyond the notion of mechanical compliance with the rules. The kind of ‘good’ that should appeal to our ethical core notwithstanding that the chief functionality of the latter has long since been replaced with the plight of the idiot, powered by the totalising drive for equalisation intolerant of difference and thirsting for unanimity at any cost. Incidentally, Adam Smith thought that agents acting to further self-interest, without either ‘knowing it’ or ‘intending it’, helped to advance the ‘interest of society’.22

Redolent though it may seem, even Smith would agree that ‘idiot’ does not necessarily designate someone of inferior intelligence.27 Rather, it denotes someone who is (liable to be) manipulated on account of having been placed into and fully accepted the context (and the consequences) of acting only out of one’s—presumed autonomous and enlightened—self-interest, albeit one that is no longer informed by the authentic sense of the ‘communal’ or the ‘collective’ and, for that reason, unable to find fulfilment. The ‘collective’ now connotes an entirely abstract construct, hollow and lacking substance. It no longer allows for the possibility of ‘1+1 > 2’, where the ‘collective’ or ‘communal’ transcends the individual without trumping them. The present day ‘collective’ is a simple sum of private egoisms, each acting in their own self-interest. Crucially, however, each ‘private person’—a dividuum, or idiot—is a vastly diminished version of the ‘individual’, and the sum of ‘private persons’ invariably represents a far lesser magnitude than the fellowship of individuals. The ‘atomistic chaos’ of modern society lacks the ethos and material necessary for building the ‘new form of community’23 (‘Gemeinschaft’) of truly ‘free individuals’29, which would be a ‘fellowship rather than the flock’.28 As a result, Nietzsche argues, the collection of ‘atomistic individuals’30 does not add up to a ‘collective individual’.32 When we become incorporated as private persons, we trade individual autonomy for the collective welfare of idiots. Though we may be adorned with the labels of equality, freedom, and dignity, we effectively surrender the right to make principled choices. The latter, Nietzsche tells us, is not at all a ‘private matter’.18

The assemblage of private persons is far weaker, more vulnerable, and politically impotent beyond the periodic hysterical outpourings of resentment; the ‘signs of the lowest and most absurd culture’.14 The mass of ‘private persons’ will never win a war. It will never build anything worthwhile, let alone guarantee a stronger future. It will, however, happily submit itself to any coercion, just as long as this subjection is sublime enough and doesn’t hurt too much, allowing private persons to bask in the oblivious trinketry of the present moment.39 Having undergone this transformative journey ‘at the freezing point of the will’, private persons lackadaisically dwell in the ‘self-created world of opinions’,37 no longer able to detect ‘the weight of the chains’.38 Zarathustra forewarned that ‘even a prison’ of slave morality would ‘seem like bliss’ to the ‘restless people’, who can only ‘enjoy their new security’ in its inescapable nets.39

The trouble is that any form of ‘mass idiocy’, by amplifying collective ‘moral effects’, invariably creates fertile ground for and becomes the conduit for the development of fascism and tyranny, which leverage ‘the power that lies in unity of popular sentiment, in the fact that everyone holds the same opinions’.42 Nietzsche argues that the ‘private lazinesses’ hidden behind ‘popular sentiment’ come at an extremely high price: they turn the masses into the accomplices of the very crimes they think they help safeguard against.41 The tyranny of words, idioms, ideas and opinions, once embraced by

28 NF-1883:16[50].
29 NF-1880:8[61].
30 NF-1882:4[48]. Cf. the excellent discussion on this point by Vanessa Lemm, Homo Natura (Edinburgh University Press 2020) 176-177.
31 NF-1882:4[85].
32 Nietzsche (n 10) §94.
34 NF-1888:14[38].
36 Nietzsche (n 10) §349.
37 NF-1887:11[341].
38 Nietzsche (n 10) ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ 810.
40 Nietzsche (n 10) §472.
41 ibid §482.

22 Nietzsche (n 10) §1.
23 ibid §443.
24 ibid §482.
25 Cf. ibid ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ 833; NF-1887:10[113].
26 ibid ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ §230.
27 Cf. Smith (n 20) Ch. 3, Section 3, ‘Of Self-Command’.
28 NF-1883:16[50].
29 NF-1880:8[61].
30 NF-1882:4[48]. Cf. the excellent discussion on this point by Vanessa Lemm, Homo Natura (Edinburgh University Press 2020) 176-177.
31 NF-1882:4[85].
32 Nietzsche (n 10) §94.
34 NF-1888:14[38].
36 Nietzsche (n 10) §349.
37 NF-1887:11[341].
38 Nietzsche (n 10) ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ 810.
40 Nietzsche (n 10) §472.
41 ibid §482.
the multitude of idiots, soon becomes transformed into a real and potent weapon of reactive tyranny: by the people, of the people and for the people.\(^4^2\) Except that these people—akin to the Homeric ‘lotus eaters’—have lost, forgotten, or put to sleep their meaning as individuals.\(^4^3\) They have traded their right to choose as autonomous individuals in exchange for the chimera of private citizenry, for the illusion of a social construct ‘in which everyone enjoys their own social contract’.\(^4^4\) They have effectively agreed to subordinate themselves to totalising oppressive drives, having squandered their ability and credibility to resist them. These idiots may occasionally develop a faint sense that they are being fooled and yet they are powerless ‘to not be fooled’, thus only exacerbating their predicament.\(^4^5\) They have become the ‘fooled ones’, and we know well the sort of things the fooled can end up sanctioning and even eagerilly participating in, believing all along that they are playing their part in bringing about the greater good.\(^4^6\)

Viewed in this context, Djokovic’s visa cancellation and his subsequent deportation were acts by the government acting ‘in the public interest’ of idiots: ensuring that idiots remain just as they are, and the bliss of idiocy remains unperturbed, for its veneer, concealing myriads of ‘subterranean demons and their knavery’, tends to be thin and fragile.\(^4^7\) That is where the contradiction lies, inverting reality and distorting valuations. This, Nietzsche—following in Aristotle’s footsteps—suggests, is where we ought to start looking for answers.

Many may argue that comparisons between the Ao of 2022 and the Berlin Olympics of 1936 are misplaced. For the most part, I would agree. But in one important respect, namely that of the perilous complacency which has rendered us mere spectators in face of the pervasive rise of the repressive social control systems, the parallels could hardly be more merited. Make no mistake, ‘Let’s turn the world into one hospital or penitentiary’ (otherwise known as ‘build back better’) is a clever slogan. Unlike many others, it represents a realistic and achievable target.\(^4^8\) It feeds on the energy we all, mostly unwittingly, lend it whilst we appear to be craving and beckoning it with nothing but the ‘good intentions’ of our hearts and minds. Alas, Nietzsche cautions that when individual sovereignty is made into a private affair ‘an abundance of dragon’s teeth are sown’ at the same time.\(^4^9\) The more we demand that general security be guaranteed, the more do new shoots of the ancient drives to domination assert themselves.\(^5^0\)

We are no longer dealing with an isolated case of the ‘lunatics taking

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\(^{4^3}\) The image of the ‘Lotus eaters’ is used by Plato in his discussion of the ‘democratic man’—i.e. private person lacking in willpower and judgement—in Plato (n 41) 561[e]-562[d]. Plato’s reference is to Book IX of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

\(^{4^4}\) NF-1888:14[197].

\(^{4^5}\) NF-1886:5[71].

\(^{4^6}\) Cf. Adam Smith on the ‘invisible hand’—a euphemism for the magic wand that transforms individuals into idiots; Smith (n 20) 183. Nietzsche’s assertion that it is always ‘the invisible hands that torment and bend us the worst’ (Z-I, *Tree*) appears imminently more accurate; Nietzsche (n 38) I ‘The Tree on the Hill’.

\(^{4^7}\) Nietzsche (n 10) §111; NF-1887:10[113].

\(^{4^8}\) Cf. the discussion in Nietzsche (n 6) §329; NF-1886:4[7]; NF-1888:14[182].

\(^{4^9}\) Nietzsche (n 10) §472.

\(^{50}\) Nietzsche (n 10) ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ §30.


\(^{52}\) Plato (n 41) 347c.

\(^{53}\) Nietzsche (n 10) §585. Consider the latest cynical attempt to shame Djokovic into vaccination by the UK’s Health Secretary, Mr. Sajid David, who suggested that it is only the millions of vaccinated spectators who make it possible for Djokovic to ‘get back to play the sport in front of them and earn millions again, it’s ok for him to have them take the vaccine, but the vaccine is not OK for him’ (author’s emphasis); Jennifer Meierhans, ‘Novak Djokovic is urged by the UK health secretary to reflect on his Covid jab refusal’ (*BBC News*, 15 February 2022) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-60391876> accessed 21 February 2022.

\(^{54}\) Nietzsche (n 10) §247.

\(^{55}\) ibid ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ §33.