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Conferencia Internacional / International Conference

el devenir de la vida the becoming of life

Actas / Proceedings

Nietzsche's Orientalist Biopolitics

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On December 20, 1885, Nietzsche sends a letter to his sister Elisabeth in which he mentions his intention to “emigrate to Japan”:

If only I were in better health and had sufficient income, I would, simply in order to attain greater serenity, emigrate to Japan. (To my great surprise I discovered that Seydlitz too has undergone a similar inner transformation: artistically he is now the first German Japanese—read the enclosed newspaper article about him!) I like being in Venice because things could be somewhat Japanese there—a few of the necessary conditions are in place.¹

Although this is one of the few references to Japan, it is also a typical revolutionary-hilarious illustration of the compulsive presence of Asian motives in Nietzsche's writing. Since Nietzsche's orientalism has been documented by several comparative studies, I will not reconstruct in detail his conception of Buddhism and Brahmanism.² The topic of my essay is instead Nietzsche's “orientalist *dispositif*,” his provokingly histrionic “becoming Oriental.” My intention is to show that, although we have learned to recognize the biopolitical implications of Nietzsche's “becoming animal,”³ we haven't started yet to absorb the consequences of his “political orientalism” which, in my opinion, is another powerful vector of his unprecedented topology of life.

Yet, what is “political orientalism?” This expression captures a radical tendency of contemporary political philosophy, as represented for instance by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's “nomadology,” Michel Foucault's genealogy of the hygienic “techniques of the self,” and Roland Barthes' Tao “political minimalism.” In all these instances, an explicitly “orientalist biopolitics” is introduced with direct reference to Nietzschean thought, and the alteration of the “Western unconscious” is performed with the help of an often parodic Asian conceptual machinery.

Nietzsche's “becoming Oriental” is a multifarious process: not only it is a performative “becoming Dionysus and Zarathustra,” it is simultaneously a more subtle and stratified “becoming Indian” by “becoming Buddhist” and “becoming a Brahmin priest.” In each instance a specific topology of life-forces is evocated; a mechanism of intensification or weakening of the will, accompanied by a technology of happiness.

A number of excellent studies have shed light on the presuppositions of Nietzsche's orientalism, assessing the paramount influence of Schopenhauer and the close friendship with Paul Deussen, a prominent scholar of Vedanta philosophy, "the first real European *expert* of the Indian philosophy, my friend Paul Deussen," as Nietzsche affirms proudly in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.⁴ We are also familiar with Nietzsche's early exposure to Indian epics during his high school years and to Indian philosophy as a student at the University of Bonn, through the lectures of Carl Schaarschmidt,⁵ and we know all too well Nietzsche's enthusiastic reading, in the Spring of 1888, of a French translation of the *Laws of Manu*, which he quotes several times in his late notebooks.

However, in the end, we don't need philological scholarship to assess the pervasiveness of an Asian *Stimmung* in Nietzsche's thought. Already in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he declares explicitly: "Yes, my friends, believe with me in Dionysian life and the rebirth of tragedy. The age of the Socratic man is over. [...] You shall accompany the Dionysian pageant from India to Greece."⁶ Not only Nietzsche dreams of being the "second German-Japanese" intellectual; he goes further, stating: "I could become the Buddha of Europe."⁷ What interests me is not the historical accuracy of Nietzsche's appropriation of Asian religions but the political and theoretical implications of Nietzsche's "becoming Oriental." In my opinion, we must move beyond the discourse of influences (Hegel, Schopenhauer, Deussen), and recognize in Nietzsche's orientalism a purely performative tendency. An attempt to speak, through the "conceptual characters" of Buddha and the Brahmanic priests, an alternative language of life-forces; a "parodistic" use of the history of religion, a counter-memory that, by inoculating the virus of the "holy lie" of the Orient, dissociates the West from itself.

Nietzsche praises Buddha as a "great physiologist," opposing the Buddhist "lofty intellectual love [...] and gratitude towards all that lies hidden" to the "bitterness, disillusionment, and resentment" of Christianity,⁸ comparing the European "inconsistency between word and deed" to the Oriental, who "is true to himself in daily life."⁹ When an Oriental seed is nurtured by favorable circumstances, the ominous historical continuity of Christianity disintegrates, suddenly unmasked and demystified. This is what happened for instance with Leonardo da Vinci: he "had a really super-Christian outlook. He knows the East, the 'land of dawn,' within himself as well as without himself. There is something super-European and silent in him" (*WFN* 180).

Yet, is Nietzsche's celebration of the "deification of the feeling of power in the Brahmin" and the "acute sensitivity" of Buddhism just a projection of his views upon a vague, exotic Asia, comparable, for instance, to his over-appreciation of French culture and Italian opera?

In the writings on European nihilism, Nietzsche speculates on the theme of a "European form of Buddhism": this would be "the extremest form of Nihilism" (*WP* I 48), an "*active negation*, after all existence has lost its meaning" (*WP* I 52). He defines this event as "*the second appearance of Buddhism*," highlighting its "precursory signs": "the increase of pity. Spiritual exhaustion. The reduction of all problems to the question of pleasure and pain" (*WP* I 59).

The second coming of a Buddhist sensibility accounts to an intensification of European Nihilism and the creation of a truly affirmative humanity: "The *catastrophe* of

Nihilism will put an end to all this Buddhistic culture” (*WP* I 59). The crucial movement of Nietzschean philosophy, the conversion of Western Nihilism, the “transvaluation of values,” is marked by the return of “the oriental subtleties” hidden “at the bottom of Christianity.”¹⁰ Since the transition from the last stage of Nihilism to a Dionysian immanentism—from the “last man” to the *Übermensch*—is the *arcanum* of Nietzsche’s thought, the fact that the accomplishment and overcoming of Nihilism is formulated as a movement internal to a renewed Buddhist sensibility may reveal some fundamental traits of Nietzsche’s vitalism.

Before concentrating on the orientalizing realm of “hypnotism” and “automatism” associated by Nietzsche with Buddhism, I wish to recall the main features of Nietzsche’s fictional Orient. First of all, as observed by Deleuze,¹¹ while Christianity is still imprisoned in the lower stages of “negative” and “reactive” Nihilism, Buddhism has the significant advantage of being a religion of “passive Nihilism.” As an elitist and cultivated reaction to the asceticism of the Brahmins, Buddhism is the genuine product of “mature people.” Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the refinement of European sensibility leads the West toward a return of Buddhism.

Nietzsche also suggests that this development could have taken place earlier. Christ was in fact a “Buddha on a non Indian soil.” Without the poisoning genius of Saint Paul, Christianity could have abolished sin and revenge. Instead, it became a moral Nihilism that denied the physiological health of Buddhism, its positive affirmation of a sensuous nothingness.

When Christianity, “by reason of an act of self-dissolution,” becomes conscious of its founding esoteric kernel, the “will for truth,” it enters the “awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of a two-thousand-year training in truth” and finally reaches the intellectual stage attained by Indian thought: “the decisive point reached five hundred years before the European era, or more precisely at the time of Buddha—it started in the Sankhyam philosophy, and then this was popularized through Buddha, and made into a religion” (*WFN* 175).

Oriental life-techniques, in both their ascetic, Brahmanic manifestations and worldly, Buddhist practices, are for Nietzsche nothing less than the most accomplished historical prefigurations of a Dionysian life-form. The Brahmins incarnate the behaviors required by an affirmative relationship with the will to power: they are gentle, frugal, self-effacing, and aristocratic. They understood that a higher kind of happiness and leisure can be reached through partial renunciations and a disdain for riches and honors. As for Buddhism, it “presupposes a very mild climate, extremely gentle and liberal customs, the complete *absence* of militarism, and the existence of higher, even scholarly classes to give focus to the movement. The highest goals are cheerfulness, quiet, and an absence of desire, and these goals are *achieved*. Buddhism is not a religion where people only aspire to perfection: perfection is the norm” (*AC* 17).

Thanks to its physiological “realism,” Buddhism is not for Nietzsche a moral religion but a bodily practice, an individualist and learned reaction against the excesses of Brahmanic asceticism. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes that Buddha, “that profound psychologist,” has not founded a religion but a “hygiene (so as not to confuse it with anything as pathetic as Christianity)” (*AC* 81).

Given the intellectual refinement of the Indian elite who has produced it, Buddhism is firmly anti-moral, “beyond good and evil:” “As the inverse of Christianity, it would come not from a revolt from below [...] but rather from physiological exhaustion, skepticism, and disenchantment. [...] In the teaching of Buddha egoism becomes a duty—writes Nietzsche in the *Antichrist*—the ‘one thing needful’, the ‘how can you get rid of suffering?’ regulates and circumscribes the entire spiritual diet.”¹²

Although Buddhism, like Christianity, is a decadent and Nihilist religion, it is firmly rooted in the “physiological conditions” of an accomplished civilization: “an excessively acute sensitivity that is expressed as a refined susceptibility to pain,” and “an over-spiritualization that has had the effect of promoting the ‘impersonal’ instincts at the expense of the personal ones” (AC 17). “Buddha took hygienic measures,” insisting “on ideas that produce either calm or amusement” (AC 17). “In sharp contrast to Christianity, it has left the self-deception of moral concepts behind,—it stands, as I put it, *beyond* good and evil” (AC 16). Quite simply, Buddhism is for Nietzsche “a religion for the end and exhaustion of civilization, while Christianity has not even managed to locate civilization yet” (AC 18).

Nietzsche’s staging of a paradoxical Buddhist biopolitics is a strategic component of his affirmative, anti-Christian politics of life. Being “a religion for the end and exhaustion of civilization,” the tragi-comical “second appearance of Buddhism” intensifies the trajectory of Nihilism. Building on the Oriental “forces that sweeten and *transfigure*” (AC 20), a Buddhist biopolitics accelerates the “act of self-dissolution” of Christianity and accompanies “that great hundred-act play that is reserved for the next two centuries of Europe, the most terrible, the most mysterious, and perhaps the most hopeful of all plays” (WFN 176).

The *décadence* of Europe began with the privilege accorded to consciousness by Socrates. The increased intensity of conscious states induced the “decline of the instincts” (WP I 363). The Greek search for virtue and happiness, and the Christian invention of an “internal voice” that measures all actions against groundless “intentions” and “laws”—thus creating the threatening world of good and evil—are direct consequences of the devaluation of instinctual automatism (WP I 141).

Given these premises, the primary topological function attributed by Nietzsche to the Oriental *dispositif* is the inversion of the relation between consciousness and instincts, reason and “nonsense,” representation and automatism: “we must, in sooth, seek *perfect life* there where it is least conscious” (WP I 363). Commenting on the Indian *Law book of Manu*—“an incomparably spiritual and superior work; it would be a sin against spirit even to mention its name in the same breath as that of the Bible” (AC 56)—, in the *Anti-Christ* Nietzsche returns to the topic of “ascetic ideals,” extensively treated and despised in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Here Indian asceticism is praised for its mastery of the instinctual and bodily dimension of life: “To prepare a book of law in the style of Manu means to give a people the right to become master one day, to become perfect,—to aspire to the highest art of life” (AC 58). The means suggested by Nietzsche in order to achieve this goal belong to the sphere of somnambulism, to a “hypnotic deadening of sensibility”: “to achieve a perfect automatism of the instinct—this is the presupposition of every type of mastery, of every type of perfection in the art of life” (AC 58). From this perspective, the doctrine of the eternal recurrence points to return as repetition, and repetition as automatism, to the bodily perfection of hypnotic

exercises. In an aphorism written at the end of 1886, Nietzsche affirms: “The ‘eternal recurrence.’ This is the extreme form of Nihilism: eternal nothingness (‘non-sense’)! European form of Buddhism” (*WP* I 49).

Since the Oriental *dispositif* is a mechanism of re-instinctualization, Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence does not perform the role that Deleuze attributes to it: a logical principle of differentiation and determination, the ontological foundation for the unfolding of intensive quantities.¹³ In fact, Deleuze’s epoch-making re-invention of Nietzsche’s philosophy is framed within his neo-Kantian ontology of intensive quantities, which leads him to conceive the will to power as a transcendental mechanism that produces relations of forces through a “differential and genetic” synthesis. Instead, I suggest that, in order to liberate Nietzsche from the spell of this energetic and neo-Kantian transcendentalism, the Oriental tendencies of Nietzsche’s thought must be activated and their nature fully mapped on a topological and dynamical space. The eternal recurrence, as the “extreme form of Nihilism,” points in Nietzsche to “eternal nothingness” as the deepest source of a liberating non-sense. The affirmative self-destruction of European civilization takes the form of a paradoxical new Buddhism, the Oriental *dispositif* —as “the right to become perfect” in life— it’s a machinic production of new instincts. Nietzsche’s “becoming Oriental” acts as a *clownesque* force of distortion of Western life-negating practices: the active creation of a superior automatism, an immanentistic politics of life.

Notes

¹ Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 359.

² See in particular Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism. Prolegomenon to a Comparative Study* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981); Graham Parkes, ed., *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Robert G. Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism. A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Davis, Bret W. "Zen After Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation Between Nietzsche and Buddhism." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 28 (Autumn 2004): 89-138.

³ See for instance Vanessa Lemm, *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy. Culture, Politics, and the Animality of the Human Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals (GM)*. Trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 104.

⁵ Figl, Johann. "Nietzsche's Early Encounters with Asian Thought." In Parkes, 51-63.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 124.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 10 4[2].

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power (WP)*. Trans. Anthonoy M. Ludovici (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), vol. I, 130.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche (WFN)* (New York: The Tudor Publishing Company, 1931), 179.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols. And Other Writings (AC)*. Trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19. Given Nietzsche's hostility toward historicism, we must be constantly aware that these statements belong to a parodic philosophy of history, to a genealogical masquerade.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy (NP)*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983), endnote 4, 215.

¹² Hulin, M. "Nietzsche and the Suffering of the Indian Ascetic." In Parkes, 71.

¹³ In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze maintains that Nietzsche has inherited from Kant a key "component," the project of "criticism" (72). However in Nietzsche, as in the neo-Kantians, a synthesis is not just a "condition" but a "genesis," a real "production" of the objet: not a gnoseological condition but an ontological mechanism of "differentiation and internal determination." Given this neo-Kantian perspective, Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's genealogy partially diverges from Foucault's interpretation of genealogy in terms of *Herkunft*—origin as biopolitical "descent"—and *Entstehung*—origin as the radical singularity of a non-causal "emergence" (Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: Pantheon Books, 1984], 76-100). In Foucault's interpretation of Nietzsche's genealogy, the origin is made of "lost and accidental events," in Deleuze it is a transcendental mechanism of determination and differentiation. Accordingly, the eternal recurrence is for Deleuze a transcendental principle of non-identity, a synthesis achieved thorough repetition, a genesis that sustains the variations of intensities of the will to power: the unity of a world that acquires its unity only by returning; the identity of a world that is the same only by repeating itself; see Gilles Deleuze. "Sur la volonté de puissance et l'éternel retour." In *Nietzsche. Cahiers de Royaumont*. (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 275-287.