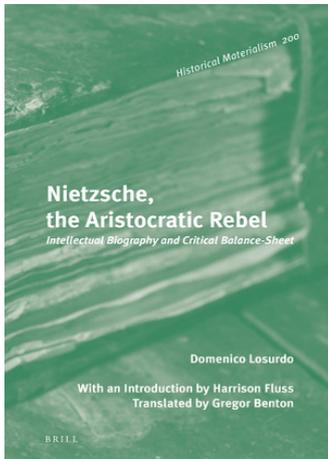


BOOK TITLE:

Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel:
Intellectual Biography and Critical
Balance-Sheet

BOOK COVER:

AUTHOR:

Domenico Losurdo, translated by
Gregor Benton with an introduction by
Harrison Fluss

ISBN:

978-90-04-27094-7

PUBLISHER:

Leiden: Brill Academic, US\$ 448
(Hardback), i-xxi+1054 pp,

PUBLISHED:

26 November 2019


REVIEWER:

Irving Hexham 
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0289-3418>

AFFILIATION:

Department of Classics and Religion,
University of Calgary

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

hexham@ucalgary.ca

DATES:

Published: 28 September 2020

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hexham, I., 2020. Book Review:
Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel:
Intellectual Biography and Critical
Balance-Sheet. KOERS — Bulletin
for Christian Scholarship, 85(1).
Available at: [https://doi.org/10.19108/
KOERS.85.1.2492](https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.85.1.2492)

COPYRIGHT:

© 2020. The Author(s).
Published under the Creative
Commons Attribution License.

Book Review:

Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel: Intellectual Biography and Critical Balance-Sheet

Originally published as *Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico. Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critic*. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.

German edition, *Nietzsche, der aristokratische Rebell*. Berlin, Argument Verlag, 2009.

The publication of *The Rise of the South African Reich* with Penguin (1964) was a masterstroke of propaganda by lifelong South African communist Brian Bunting (1921-2008). With one book he significantly changed attitudes towards South Africa worldwide. Prior to its publication the Nationalist regime in Pretoria was widely regarded as a reactionary movement with racist overtones that would eventually be defeated at the polls. After its publication it was seen in a new way - that is as a totally evil movement inspired by German National Socialism which had to be defeated by armed struggle if necessary.

Eventually, the German scholar Albrecht Hagemann in *Südafrika und das "Dritte Reich"* (1989) and the South African exile, Patrick J. Furlong in *Between Cross and Swastika* (1991) examined the issue in detail. They concluded that the relationship between Afrikaner Nationalism and Nazism was a far more complex movement than Bunting had led his readers to believe.

Although neither of these writers discussed the issue in any detail, an indicator of the historical and intellectual gulf between Afrikanerdom and Nazism can be seen in the use made by National Socialist and Afrikaner Nationalist leaders and writers of the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900). The Nazis adored Nietzsche and frequently referred to his work. Afrikaner Nationalist authors and politicians largely ignored him and only a few ever referred to him.

In the English-speaking world Nietzsche was long regarded as a forerunner of Nazism and the source of its atrocities. Then, a book appeared in America that bluntly denied any connection between Nietzsche's ideas and the Nazis. This was Walter Kaufmann's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1950). Over the next thirty years Kaufmann translated and published the major works of Nietzsche in English, making him Nietzsche's advocate in the English-speaking-world.

Kaufmann began his defence of Nietzsche by rejecting the supposed links between Nietzsche's teachings and National Socialism. He did not deny that the Nazis embraced what they thought were Nietzsche's ideas, particularly what they saw as his anti-Semitism, but he questioned their understanding. To counter writers who identified Nietzsche's work with the Nazis, Kaufmann argued that the Nazis and the majority of both British and North American scholars had been misled in their understanding of Nietzsche by his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (1846-1935).

This came about because after Nietzsche's death in 1900 his sister gained control of her brother's estate. According to Kaufmann, she then recreated her brother's works in her own image and created a virtual Nietzsche industry. In doing so she carefully edited versions of her brother's writings which she laced with her own vitriolic anti-Semitism. This anti-Semitism, Kaufmann claimed, was absent from the original manuscripts (Kaufmann 1950: xiii-xiv, 3-12, 40-41, 78).

Kaufmann rounded off his presentation of his new understanding of Nietzsche by claiming Nietzsche was actually pro-Jewish and sympathetic to the development of Zionism. He blamed various German authors, who until then had been recognized authorities on Nietzsche and his work, for creating the Nazi Nietzsche. The main ones Kaufmann identified were Stefan George (1868-1933) and Alfred Baeumler (1887-1968). George played a key role in the development of German youth movements before and after the First World War which later led to the development of the Nazi Youth. Baumler was the official philosopher of National Socialism and a Nietzsche scholar who had used Nietzsche's work to legitimate Nazism. Both men identified by Kaufmann for creating the link between Nietzsche's thought and the Nazis were perfect fits for the role of pro-Nazi hacks who distorted Nietzsche's true teachings.

What made Kaufmann's argument compelling was the fact that he was a German-Jewish refugee who had fled to America in 1939 to escape Nazi Germany. In America he studied first at Williams College and then from 1941 at Harvard until he entered the American Army towards the close of World War Two. After spending a few years in the army Kaufmann returned to Harvard where he was awarded his PhD on Nietzsche in 1947.

After that he was hired by Princeton University where he taught for over thirty years. Further, Kaufmann's appreciation of Nietzsche was supported by the fact that many Zionist leaders had been devoted to Nietzsche's works which were avidly read by numerous Jewish readers (Golomb, 1997; 2004:23-45; Golomb & Wistrich, 2009).

It is against this background and the rehabilitation of Nietzsche that the well-respected Italian scholar Domenico Losurdo (1941-2018) lobbed an academic bombshell in 2002. This was the publication of his *Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico. Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critic*. A translation of the book was published in German in 2009 as *Nietzsche, der aristokratische Rebell* causing quite a stir. Now, at long last, an English translation, *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel: Intellectual Biography and Critical Balance-Sheet* (2019) has been published by Brill of Leiden,

This is a truly ground-breaking work that at a stroke undermines many of the intellectual developments of the past fifty years during which Nietzsche and his ideas have gained increasing currency influencing many trends in the humanities and social sciences. Losurdo's book ought to cause scholars to rethink their understanding of Nietzsche and such popular intellectual movements as postmodernism and post-colonialism which are influenced by Nietzsche's writings.

The arguments Losurdo presents are backed by the systematic presentation of evidence that undermines the popular view of Nietzsche as a progressive thinker. Losurdo demonstrates that slavery lies at the core of for Nietzsche work not as a symbolic metaphor but as a social reality that has to be preserved at all costs. Throughout his book Losurdo provides numerous references to Nietzsche's papers that show that when Nietzsche spoke about slavery he meant human bondage as slavery manifested itself throughout history (Losurdo, 2019, 9-10).

Consequently, when Nietzsche made statements like it is "nature as such" that condemns "the mass of humans" to slavery he was not using a metaphor or an analogy. He was expressing his own view about the true basis of society. This is how he understood life and

believed it ought to function if civilization was to exist at all (p.355). Only by restoring slavery to its true role as the basis of society and having no qualms about its necessity for their survival of anything worth preserving in human culture could an elite group of intellectuals, whose task it was to shape society, face the future with confidence.

This long and tightly written book is packed with citations from Nietzsche's original works and firmly rooted in archival sources. It uses the Nietzsche archives to show that he must not be interpreted as an abstract thinker who produced challenging ideas to stimulate thought. Rather he must be recognised as a reactionary revolutionary who sought to restore a past that was rapidly disappearing.

Losurdo demonstrates that Nietzsche saw his own works as a clarion call to action. His writings were intended to alert the elite to the doom they faced if they did not regain the courage to assert their dominance. Therefore, he hoped he could galvanize them to take the necessary actions to restore slavery to its rightful place as the foundation of society thus ensuring their survival and that of aristocratic governance.

Using archival evidence Losurdo argues that most readers of Nietzsche's work have been deliberately misled by a small lobby group. Therefore, instead of accepting the arguments of scholars like Kaufmann, Losurdo begins his study with an examination of the Nietzsche archives and his unpublished papers. Among the materials in them he found what he sees as a key decision made by Nietzsche in the early 1870s. This was to moderate and disguise his anti-Semitism. It was done on the advice of his friends Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and his wife Cosima (1837-1930) who told him to stop making vitriolic criticisms of Jews if he wanted to avoid being dismissed out of hand as an anti-Semite.

Losurdo shows that Nietzsche heeded their advice although his fundamental objections to Jews and Judaism remained. In the process he deliberately cultivated the view that his thinking about Jews had changed even though, in reality, it had not. To do this Nietzsche made seemingly favourable comments about Jews and their impact on culture and history. But, while these comments were genuine, they masked the fact that he believed the Jews hid their true nature and desire to dominate others (Losurdo, 2019:43-44, 78, 111, 113).

Therefore, it is wrong to see Nietzsche's views about Jews in terms of ambivalence or complexity (Mandel 1998:6, 23-24; 183-230; Williams 2006:223-228). They were not. Nietzsche, as Losurdo shows, was a thorough-going anti-Semite who sought almost above all else to undermine and destroy Judaism.

Unlike philosophers and an increasing number of intellectual historians who draw on edited editions of Nietzsche's works, Losurdo concentrates on unpublished sources including Nietzsche's original manuscripts, letters, and notes. Using such sources, which are largely ignored by other scholars, Losurdo shows that from his teenage years onwards Nietzsche believed "the Jewish prophets were primarily responsible for the 'slave revolt in morality'" (Losurdo, 2019:466) and blamed them for creating centuries of social and political unrest throughout the Western world (Losurdo, 2019:469).

According to Losurdo one of the main causes for the misinterpretation of Nietzsche's work is the refusal by many scholars to recognize that Nietzsche's primary interests were political not philosophical. He idolized aristocracy and saw the destruction of aristocratic culture as a tragedy that threatened to replace civilization with a pseudo civilization of the masses (Losurdo, 2019:105; 204).

Consequently, he hated all types of emancipatory movements (pp. 355-356; 369-371). These he believed went against the natural order of things. Thus, the long process by which civilization evolved stood in danger of destruction by democratic movements that gave

power to the masses (Losurdo, 2019:49, 69, 383, 387). Therefore, he saw the only way to save civilization as the ruthless rule of an aristocratic elite (Losurdo, 2019:101, 401, 598, 675-676,728).

For Nietzsche, the United States of America stood as a warning. The leniency of many Americans towards slaves and what he saw as their absurd attempts to educate a few of them demanded a response. The only solution he advocated was the ruthless re-imposition of slavery based on brute force (Losurdo, 2019:383). Nietzsche's musings on topics like this are used by Losurdo to prove that one cannot tame one's arguments by seeing them as metaphors. To do so is to ignore Nietzsche's clearly expressed intent which runs through his entire work from his earliest writings to the onset of his madness.

Losurdo's argument and the evidence he presents from Nietzsche's own writings make it very difficult to see Nietzsche in the way he is usually portrayed. What Losurdo does is prove the importance of taking a writer's self-understanding and expressed intent seriously. This means carefully examining writings, archival documents, original manuscripts, letters, and other primary sources. To do otherwise, unless such materials are totally lost, is to distort the author's work.

In Part 7 of this long book Losurdo sums up his arguments and the evidence he presents as well as briefly answering objections to his work. If the book is too long for some people they at least should read this section which leaves the reader in no doubt about Nietzsche's intentions, the importance of slavery as a social reality in his thought, and the danger his work represents in terms of its potential to destroy democracy and the humane society (Losurdo, 2019:923-1010).

Finally, to return to the beginning of his review, if Losurdo is correct about the true nature of Nietzsche's work then it is clear that the Nazis did not misappropriate it for their own racist ends. At the same time it also indicates that however one views Afrikaner Nationalism it was not rooted in Nietzsche's ideas and therefore has to be viewed as quite distinct from National Socialism.

Bibliography

- Furlong, Patrick J. 1991. *Between Cross and Swastika*. Hanover (USA) & London.
- Golomb, Jacob. 1997. *Nietzsche and Jewish Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Golomb, Jacob. 2004. *Nietzsche and Zion*. Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press.
- Golomb, Jacob. & Robert S. Wistrich eds. 2009. *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?: On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400825332.1>.
- Hagemann, Albrecht. 1989. *Südafrika und das >>Dritte Reich<<*. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.
- Kaufmann, I. *Nietzsche: 1968 [1950]. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. New York, Vintage Books.
- Mandel, Siegfried. 1998. *Nietzsche AND the Jews*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Whyte, Max. 2008. "The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler. 's 'Heroic Realism,'" *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43(2): 171-194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009408089028>.
- Williams, Stephen, N. 2006. *Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.