

# *Nietzsche in the Nineteenth Century: Social Questions and Philosophical Interventions.*

Robert C. Holub

Reviewed by Daniel Blue

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Derek Parfit supposedly divided those who read philosophers from the past into two groups: archaeologists and grave-robbers.<sup>1</sup> The former ask whether we can understand and use the ideas of historical figures without immersion in their intellectual ecology. Grave-robbers pick and choose, retaining what they wish while dismissing aspects which they consider outdated.

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1 Michael Rosen, "The History of Ideas as Philosophy and History" in *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter 2011), pp. 691-720. 702.

Nietzsche was often a grave-robbler in the above sense. So it is interesting to compare him with Robert C. Holub, plainly a diligent and highly respectful archaeologist. Holub takes pains to render justice to his more freewheeling subject. Nonetheless, the irony in his prose sometimes alerts readers to the methodological dissonance separating the two men. Indeed, it is present from the opening pages when Holub cautions Nietzscheans that some of the philosopher's self-characterizations are not to be trusted.

Holub begins by noting two verbal expressions which Nietzsche used when comparing outside figures (including himself) to what in his eyes were the middling contemporaries among whom he and they lived. In his youth he liked the term "*unzeitgemäß*"-- Holub renders this as "untimely" (p. 461, FN 1)<sup>2</sup>--the point being that certain texts and persons present a worldview different from (and implicitly transcending) the social and cultural moment in which they are produced. As Nietzsche explains, speaking of Wagner, "[His] art does not belong to our *present* art: he is far *ahead* or *above* it" (Quoted on p. 1)<sup>3</sup>. Such figures do not fit their age and are therefore intrinsically "untimely."

Nietzsche came to regret this expression (KSA 12.125), although he used it one final time in *TI* ("Skirmishes" §2).<sup>4</sup> However, Holub argues that towards the end of his productive life Nietzsche expressed similar temporal incongruences, as evinced in the expression, "Some are born posthumously." This phrase foregrounds another aspect of Nietzsche's texts--their lack of readership and accessibility rather than their disruptive nature—but it, too, relates to time and indicates that Nietzsche believed that neither he nor his works were suited to his era.

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2 All translations by Robert C. Holub.

3 NL 1875 11[19]. KSA 8.205.

4 In Holub's translation, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man" (2)

Holub suggests that Nietzsche's claims in this regard are theoretically implausible and in the first case factually false. Far from being due to intrinsic superiority, "[Nietzsche's] self-proclaimed untimeliness can be attributed to the fact that he sometimes took less popular positions, and to the fact that his views were so poorly disseminated in the German public sphere during his own lifetime" (p. 219). Despite Nietzsche's occasional posturing as an aloof master, emerging only occasionally to utter sibylline truths, he in fact lived full-time among earthlings, constantly engaging in interchanges which he may have found more useful than he acknowledges. "Throughout the two decades of his writing," Holub insists, "Nietzsche was always in dialogue with theories, movements and events of his era." Or, as Gregory Moore has said (as quoted by Holub), "Nietzsche's thought is so deeply rooted in the issues, fears and values of the nineteenth century, that it is unthinkable outside of this context" (p. 320).<sup>5</sup> Holub's book contends "that an understanding of several of his main convictions and propositions is possible only if we pay sufficient attention to the discourses in which he participated" (p. 3).

Holub's introduction (and some Concluding Remarks at the end) frame the rest of the book and somewhat guide the reader in interpretation of the latter. As he states in the opening, "To a certain extent Nietzsche disguises his indebtedness to contemporary sources, leading readers and subsequent commentators away from the conversations in which he was involved..." (p. 5) Holub proposes to expose this subterfuge, and he does so by exploring nine "discourses" in which Nietzsche grappled with the dominant issues of the day: the Education Question, the German Question, the Social Question, the Women's Question, the Colonial Question, the Jewish Question, the

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

Evolution Question, the Cosmological Question, and the Eugenics Question. This is a great deal of material to cover, and the ambition and the amount of labor needed to complete a volume on this scale can scarcely be overestimated. Holub indicates (p. 4, p. 523) that his book has been a quarter century in the making. This is evident in the breadth and detail of his research.

As a sample of Holub's method, we might examine ploys from a single chapter, "The Evolution Question." Holub begins with the observation that while thinkers in the immediate aftermath of Nietzsche's collapse tended to construe his notion of the overman within a biological context, this assumption fell into disfavor, not least because it had been embraced by the National Socialists in Germany (p. 313, pp. 318-319). Those who dismissed the biological element offered many plausible reasons, including the fact that Nietzsche himself seems to reject this interpretation in *EH* "Books" § I. There he writes, "Other learned cattle caused me on [the overman's] account to be suspected of Darwinism." That seems direct and unquestionable, but Holub shows that this statement is more ambiguous than it might appear (pp. 315-316). As several works have recently explained, Darwin's books were variously interpreted and misunderstood in the aftermath of publication.<sup>6</sup> Thus when Nietzsche rejected "Darwinism," he was not necessarily rejecting Darwin, whom he never read, but one or more interpretations currently fashionable in late-nineteenth-century Germany. Certainly, his attacks by no means excluded the possibility that he was espousing views which we would consider "Darwinian" today.

Yet this is not the only way in which our understanding of "Darwinism" is historically conditioned. Indeed, by describing the ways Nietzsche interpretation was purified of its supposed biologicistic taint, Holub is describing history of another kind, the ways our present views were gradually constituted.

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<sup>6</sup> Holub repeatedly cites the work of Peter J. Bowler, particularly his *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

If we often no longer think of Nietzsche in biological terms, it is in part because we have been trained not to do so. Meanwhile, Darwinism in the nineteenth century had value connotations of a kind probably unknown to the general public today. While most of us do not ordinarily consider this scientific theory to be inherently political (aside from its obvious biblical implications), Holub quotes Alfred Kelly's claim that "German popular Darwinism was a continuation of the old eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition. German Darwinism sought to crush superstition, to inform, to liberate, and, indirectly, to democratize".<sup>7</sup> This gave the early, anti-left Nietzsche ample cause to treat "Darwinism" with suspicion, particularly since the theory was associated with a progressive view of history, a form of optimism which Nietzsche could never approve. On the contrary, he believed throughout his adult years that the human race had undergone decline (pp. 356-358). He was also annoyed because throughout his productive life, beginning with *BT* (p. 317), the public associated him with various strands of Darwinism.

Holub provides a good deal more information both on the ways Nietzsche learned of Darwinian theory and the ways contemporary books inspired him to extend his own views. Meanwhile, Holub amply makes the point that when Nietzsche mentions "Darwinism," we cannot simply pluck *The Origin of Species* from our shelves, much less bring to bear "evolution" as we conceive the theory today. These are historically conditioned terms, and leg-work is necessary before we can plausibly assume we know what Nietzsche meant.

The above paragraphs offer at most a first glance at the helpful information to be found in Holub's chapter on "The Evolution Question." Comparable scrutiny and stimulating insights can be found in the remaining eight. Sometimes Holub offers startling historical information. For example, the defeat of the French and subsequent consolidation of German states allowed

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin: The Popularization of Darwinism in Germany, 1860-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 7.

the country to begin its industrial age in earnest. As a result, the German worker population grew from 1 million in 1844 to 17 times that number at the time when Nietzsche began *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (pp.125 - 126). No wonder that he so often found himself besieged by socialists, a group that, after some early dalliances, he scorned.

In his chapter on colonialism Holub bids readers to beware comparing Nietzsche's notion of "the good European" with the democracy-based, comparative equanimity of the European Community today (p. 246). Nietzsche's figure was more solitary and removed, and while Nietzsche definitely construes "the Good European" to serve as an alternative to nationalism (Ibid.), the term "simultaneously discloses a Eurocentric conviction that, he chillingly adds, "does not exclude the ruthless application of military force and economic exploitation in a vastly conceived colonial enterprise" (p 252). Unsurprisingly, Holub links colonialism not only with "the Good European" but with "great politics" (p. 245, pp. 252 - 259).

Finally, in an effort to explain Nietzsche's seeming ambivalence with regard to the "Jewish Question," Holub offers a history of the term, "anti-Semitism," and explains that it had a quite different meaning from "anti-Judaism." Nietzsche unequivocally opposed anti-Semitism (pp. 288-289), but his letters (and those of most of his friends) frequently include anti-Jewish slurs, an apparent inconsistency which seems not to have troubled them at all (pp. 295-301).

Meanwhile, a problem arises, which Holub never resolves. Because Nietzsche poses as a solitary eminence, he is almost required by his role to indicate that he has created his writings out of his own intellect and imagination, with minimal help from contemporaries. Holub begins his book with a couple of examples in which Nietzsche tacitly misrepresents his dependence on secondary literature: the acknowledgement, for example, that Nietzsche's knowledge of most philosophers was not gained first-hand from reading them but largely gleaned through secondary sources (p. 4). Holub also men-

tions a host of historical facts taken from a legal treatise, which Nietzsche uses to bolster his case concerning paying debts in *GM II §5*. In the published work Nietzsche arguably gives the impression that he has discovered these specifics himself. He certainly doesn't mention the book (*Law as a Cultural Phenomenon*) or author (Josef Kohler) from whom he derived them (pp. 5 - 6).

Holub's point is that Nietzsche has appropriated scholarship which is not his own in order to foster his pose of self-sufficiency. Yet in availing himself of another's findings without acknowledgment of any kind, Nietzsche has moved beyond questionable self-presentation to what some might regard as academic malfeasance.

This raises a problem which permeates the book. Holub often mentions but rarely dwells on Nietzsche's cooption of other writers' insights and research. He provides the facts, but never foregrounds the ethical implications. Perhaps he doesn't want to raise this potentially charged issue because to do so would overshadow his main thesis, that Nietzsche read and responded to his contemporaries a great deal more than most of his readers are aware. But the secondary topic overshadows the book anyway and this is to some extent an unavoidable result of Holub's thesis. His entire book revolves around information that Nietzsche rarely mentioned and indeed seems to have suppressed. The more successfully Holub demonstrates this, the more noticeable Nietzsche's silence becomes. He may have had excellent reasons for treating these as inadmissible, as will be shown later in this review, but until that issue is addressed it remains difficult to ignore. Holub shows that Nietzsche was influenced by his contemporaries. What he does not address is why (besides vanity) Nietzsche kept those debts unacknowledged.

Meanwhile, Holub's own historical situation bears mention. He rightly observes that his thesis is by no means an outlier in our times. For a century after his collapse Nietzsche was treated as a kind of self-sufficient giant, impervious to influence by any but the most august philosophers. The situation has changed considerably in the past two decades, and Holub acknowledges the works of Thomas Brobjer, Christian Emden, Hugo Drochon, Gregory Moore, Robin Small, and Anthony Jensen, among others, who have contributed to this shift in opinion (p. 461, FN 4, FN 6). Meanwhile, as already stated, he mentions that he himself has worked on this project for 25 years. His book is not so groundbreaking as it would have been if published shortly after its conception. The works of Brobjer, Moore, and Small in particular, all of whom published significant work in the early 2000s, broke new ground apparently after Holub began work on his project. Accordingly, while the final publication undoubtedly benefits from Holub's prolonged immersion in the relevant scholarship, it will enter the world less dramatically because of its quarter-century gestation.

If we today wish to evaluate Holub's work, we would have to subdivide our critique into two parts: a consideration of Holub's introduction (where he states his contention) and the examinations of the nine discourses (where he largely provides evidence). Examination of the latter would have to be delivered by experts in their fields, that is, by those at least as knowledgeable in these nine subject matters as Holub himself.

Instead, let us look at his principal thesis--that Nietzsche was not so monolithic and self-contained as he claimed and that before we can understand him we must study his historical circumstances and how he engaged with contemporary issues. We might break this down in turn to two parts: is Holub right? And what are the implications?

Nietzsche may have professed himself a hermit. No one who reads is entirely alone, however, and in letters he repeatedly stated that he could not live without libraries and bookstores. We have lists of books he took from libraries and books he purchased on his own, not to mention the enduring witness of his personal library. As we might expect, most of those books are by contemporary authors and many deal in whole or part with issues that seemed burning at the time. Holub deals with most phases of this process, including ways Nietzsche addressed these seemingly local topics in his books. That in itself is enough to uphold the first issue as encapsulated by Holub's thesis.

The second, more serious issue is whether this is important, a question which takes us back to the distinction which began this review. Some people (archaeologists) seem predisposed to try to understand past philosophers' positions both within the context of their development and their times. Others (grave-robbers) favor a more direct and simple reading which lets them get immediately to work doing what they construe as philosophy. Indeed, this may explain Nietzsche's aforementioned reluctance to mention all his sources. He was no archaeologist. He just wanted to get to work on matters of immediate interest to him.

It is best to close with Holub's own assessment of Nietzsche's accomplishments. Nietzsche, he contends, was indeed a child of his time, as we all are. If this insight induces some mild disenchantment, a recognition "that in various areas he was not always and in all regards the great thinker we once assumed he was," (460), then this must be accepted as a scholarly advance. Of course, one might wonder who the "we" are who hold this inflated view of Nietzsche, but certainly outside the academy and sometimes within it people do accord the philosopher an almost mystical status. In addition to

extending our knowledge of the philosopher and his milieu, then, and further showing how these can be useful to interpreting Nietzsche's positions, Holub administers a cleansing dose of skepticism to those who might exaggerate the philosopher's importance. If his book took a long time to complete, it was worth the wait.