

Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History
by Christian J. Emden
Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008

Reviewed by Daniel Blue

In his later books Nietzsche repeatedly complains that philosophers have no sense of history. On a more modest level and with gentler and more respectful remonstrance, Christian J. Emden makes a similar claim. Surveying recent discussions of Nietzsche's political thought in English, he remarks that they show little awareness of the political context in which Nietzsche lived and to which his views responded. It should not be forgotten that Nietzsche lived through several of the more tumultuous turning points in German history: the Revolution of 1848, the Austro-Prussian War, the Franco-Prussian War, the creation of the new German state, and the subsequent economic boom, which brought in its train panics and a search for scapegoats.

Fundamental as were these seismic disturbances, more subtle shifts in the intellectual and cultural climate of Nietzsche's time were also unsettling. The neo-humanist and generalist ideal of *Bildung* gave way to the fact-centered, highly specialized approach of the natural sciences. The newly formed German state invoked historical foundation myths in a bid to inspire a vision of national unity and purpose. And historians began to recognize that causal and teleological approaches to their field were ever less viable, leaving historical events to seem irreducibly contingent. In efforts to come to terms with these and other cultural and intellectual developments Friedrich Nietzsche devised his own approach to history, and it is here that Emden finds his core topic. He sees Nietzsche's engagement with history as pivotal in the creation of his political views, and the goal of Emden's book is nothing less than "to assess the role that historical

thought, and his notion of ‘historical philosophizing,’ play in [Nietzsche’s] understanding of modern political culture.”ⁱ

Emden begins *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* with Nietzsche’s education, a heritage that he shows was itself saturated in political implications. Biographers have often told of the classical heritage that Nietzsche inherited: the vision of Greece proposed by Winckelmann, the reconfiguration of philology by Wolf, and the acceptance of the classics as a paradigm by Humboldt, who then prescribed them as a model in Prussian schools. Less noted in the English-speaking world, at least with regard to Nietzsche scholarship,ⁱⁱ is the extent to which this infatuation with antiquity was intertwined with political longings and ideals. “The nostalgic vision of Greek antiquity that can be detected in the writings of Winckelmann, Schlegel and Humboldt contains a utopian dimension that, almost automatically, politicized any appreciation of antiquity,” Emden observes.ⁱⁱⁱ Whether it was the acclamation of the Greek cultural model as “a powerful counter-image to the political and cultural particularism of the German states,”^{iv} the prestige of German philology that became a point of patriotic pride, or the notion of *Bildung* itself, which was propagated by the government and inevitably suggested governmental sanction, classical education carried unacknowledged political baggage, reinforcing what Emden calls “the ideological convergence of Greece and Germany.”^v

Already as a young man at the University of Leipzig Nietzsche had begun to see through the presuppositions of his heritage. Many researchers have noted the effect Lange had on his philosophic development. Emden shows how Nietzsche could have taken one of Lange’s central positions—that our perceptions were reflective of our physiological organization and therefore allowed no direct knowledge of a thing in itself

– and recognized its implications for the historian. While the past is certainly no thing in itself, it too can never be directly inspected, and our interest in it must therefore reflect our current desires and needs. As a result Nietzsche was already aware of the potentially distorting yet inescapable constraints of what we today call “presentism,” a term Emden himself does not use. Emden also deals at length with ways that Kant’s third *Critique* might have disabused Nietzsche of any temptation to view history as having goals or purpose, an assumption then common in German historiography. “It is his reading of Kant,” Emden observes, “... that finally forces Nietzsche to take the problem of historical knowledge seriously.”^{vi}

If Nietzsche was already veering from the presuppositions of his Prussian and Saxon peers, he found encouragement and support at the University of Basel, where the work of Johann Jakob Bachhofen, Jacob Burckhardt, and Franz Overbeck could only reinforce his skepticism. It bears saying that the misgivings entertained by the Basel history professors with regard to their German rivals were amply returned by the latter. Theodore Mommsen of Berlin had given a history co-written by Bachofen a vituperative review. This was partly because Mommsen questioned Bachofen’s scholarship, but also, Emden suggests, because Bachofen’s approach threatened the Berlin historian’s belief in parallelisms between the Roman and German states. Emden discerns similar motives behind Wilamowitz’s attack on Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that book Nietzsche had in effect questioned the cultural underpinnings of the new German order, and Wilamowitz’s pamphlets could be construed less as a defense of traditional classicism than a reassertion of the neo-humanist identification of Germany with Greece.

Meanwhile, Basel served as an outpost from which Nietzsche could survey political developments in his native land with both literal and metaphorical distance. He himself took part in the Franco-Prussian War but was swiftly disabused of any illusions concerning the new German nation, as could be seen in his essay on David Friedrich Strauss. Particularly troubling for Nietzsche, according to Emden, was the government's appropriation of historical sites and tropes in order to validate its own existence. Whether in the form of public monuments ("the temple of Walhalla"), festivals ("Sedan Day") or as mirrored in academic histories that foreshadowed the German Reich in the guise of Macedonia or Rome (the works of Droysen and Mommsen), the government adroitly appropriated historical content to prop up its claims to authority. Emden urges the reader to see Nietzsche's essay, "Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in historical context as a direct response to the new popularization of history under government auspices. He further argues that this essay was directed less against the engulfment of the imagination by excessive study than as a protest against the state's use of historical content for its purposes. Nietzsche's target, Emden proposes, was not just "an excess of the historical, but also ... a politicization of the past."^{vii} Accordingly, Emden claims, "The politics of history is ... at the very center of the second 'Untimely Meditation.'^{viii}

While Emden spends many pages on this essay and proposes rich reinterpretations of Nietzsche's terms "monumental," "antiquarian," and "critical" history, he concludes that its arguments are confused and ultimately fail. He sees it, however, as a turning point in Nietzsche's own study of the past. As against a common assumption that Nietzsche abandoned historical studies along with his professoriate, Emden argues that he merely chose to approach the field from a fresh direction. Thus, Nietzsche's critique of his

colleagues in the incomplete meditation, “We Philologists,” is less a condemnation of the discipline itself than a recognition that the work of its practitioners was shot through with unacknowledged social and political views. Nietzsche did not abandon history. He chose to come at it from a different angle.

The newly invented field of anthropology was helpful here, and with characteristic thoroughness Emden explores the emergence of that fledgling science and presents some of the specific insights Nietzsche gained from reading works by its practitioners. Using these new discoveries, Nietzsche deployed his historical training to show how mythic beliefs arose and then evolved through time. His aim, however, was less to show directly the falsity of certain absolutist beliefs than to demonstrate the contingency of their appearance and thus to problematize their pretensions to timeless universality. For Nietzsche “normativity has a history,”^{ix} Emden observes, and the philosopher’s historical studies were meant to bring into question and so inhibit the knee-jerk immediacy of response on which the state depended. Yet it was not just the government whose cooption of history Nietzsche questioned. He was quite willing to direct his fire against those of a liberal persuasion (Mill, Spencer, Comte). Both “the evolutionary theories of social progress that permeated contemporary liberalism,” Emden argues, “. . . and the political foundation myths of nationalism and religious identity . . . were really two sides of the same coin. They were both suggestive of a grand narrative of civilization which culminated in what [Nietzsche] regarded as a hollow herd morality. . . .

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Emden has now arrived at the notion of genealogy, which he conceives as Nietzsche’s principal contribution to historical thought. He is particularly interested in the

ways Nietzsche's theories of value allowed him to link social and cultural development with participation in the physical world. Nietzsche had already announced in *Beyond Good and Evil* his ambition "to translate humanity back into nature." Emden labors at length to show how Nietzsche aligns his historical theories with his studies in the natural sciences. In his previous book, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body*,^{xi} Emden had addressed ways in which Nietzsche's theory of language and his biological researches complemented one another. In the current work he brings those insights to bear, as he demonstrates how Nietzsche used naturalistic methods to explain the creation of social realities, without in the process taking a reductionist position.

Emden's call to take Nietzsche's naturalism seriously, not just on the metaphysical and epistemological levels, but in the domains of history and politics, represents just one of many interesting positions in a book replete with fresh and insightful material. *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* rarely touches on a topic without pausing to present its history (including at one point a history of the various kinds of history); and Emden is always careful to analyze the various meanings of controversial terms ("historicism," "naturalism") he encounters along the way. His exceptional range of knowledge, both of 19th-century German politics and philosophy, allows him to present a great deal of information which has not been previously available in English. His examination of the influence of Edward Burnett Tylor and Albert Hermann Post on *On the Genealogy of Morals*, for example, will fascinate many readers. Wide-ranging and weighty as his scholarship may be, however, it is leavened with an intellectual acuity, which will stimulate even those skeptical of the importance of historical background. Of particular interest to many readers will be Emden's frequent

examinations of the philosophic heritage that both preceded and followed Nietzsche. Extensive discussions of Kant and Hegel (as well as Herder, Fichte, and Schelling) on the one hand, and of Weber and Simmel (along with Troelsch, Benjamin and Mannheim) on the other, suggest a desire to place Nietzsche's thought within a line of development which ranges from the age of Enlightenment to the mid-twentieth century and arguably beyond.

Yet the reader may ask: What of Emden's initial challenge? To what extent has he succeeded in his goal to show that Nietzsche's historical situation and his own understanding of history are essential to understanding his politics? It is helpful here to distinguish between what we might call Nietzsche's negative and positive politics, that is, between what he attacked and what he espoused. Emden does an excellent job of showing how pervasive were Nietzsche negative attacks on contemporary politics. He has thereby revealed political dimensions in Nietzsche's writings that readers might overlook and enlarged the range of texts which must be seen as relevant to discussions of Nietzsche's political thought. To that extent his book is an unqualified success.

But what of Nietzsche's "positive politics," the approaches of which he approved and which form, after all, the primary focus of the Nietzsche scholars critiqued at the beginning? Basically, Emden argues that Nietzsche called for an aristocratic hierarchy, which would be constituted by certain sovereign individuals who have cast off the morality of custom to accept an ethics of responsibility. His presentation is of course far more elaborate than that, since he discusses every aspect of this characterization at length, addressing, for example, the "ethics of responsibility," a notion which he takes

from Max Weber, over the course of 12 pages. And his presentation is far more nuanced than this short formulation.

Nonetheless, readers may be forgiven if they find this account rather questionable and tame. It is tame because parts of it seem obvious and require no extensive historical study, such as Emden's, to be discovered or understood. Any undergraduate could recognize that Nietzsche was suspicious of the morality of custom and that he tended to favor aristocratic hierarchies. We did not need Emden's researches to tell us this. One might respond, of course, that Emden's account is more subtle and nuanced than most undergraduates would be capable of grasping, but that merely leads to the second objection, which is that aspects of this account are questionable. In his approach Emden leans heavily on Nietzsche's proposal of "the sovereign individual," a notion that has been seriously challenged lately and which surfaces only once and in a single paragraph of Nietzsche's writing.^{xiii} It thus presents a slender basis for so ambitious and wide-ranging a topic as "Nietzsche's theory of politics." The author is aware of this difficulty and tries to eke out the meagerness of the sovereign individual's résumé by identifying that figure with the *Übermensch* and Free Spirit. These figures, however, have problems of their own, and it will take a sustained argument, not a brisk identification, to see them as designating the same kind of person. Emden, who is so careful and scrupulous when dealing with Nietzsche's account of history, seems comparatively credulous and glib when he leaves that field to deal with Nietzsche's "positive" contribution.

If these seem flaws in Emden's book, they ultimately redound to his advantage, for one could argue that they demonstrate how important to his political vision Nietzsche's historical investigations really were. As Emden has amply shown,

Nietzsche's views on history consistently provided both a basis and tools for critique in his attacks on contemporary politics. What his book also suggests, however, is that Nietzsche's political acuity weakens proportionately as he steps outside this discipline. It is only when Nietzsche attempted to transcend history, when he envisioned what a helpful politics might be *in abstracto*, that his insight began to falter.

In his final chapter Emden seems to acknowledge this very point and observes that any positive theory to be proposed by Nietzsche was limited by his belief that Europe was about to enter a period of transition which would last two hundred years. It was simply too early to make predictions. Also, the genealogical approach itself, while of use in critique, proved inhibiting when seeking a positive viewpoint. Nietzsche's historical innovations may have had the unhappy effect, Emden surmises, of undermining his faith in specific political solutions.

It would be unfair and misleading to end consideration of Emden's account with what, after all, is the weakest aspect of a thoughtful, well-written, and industriously researched book. *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* is best read slowly and repeatedly. While it has a grand arc, and every chapter and section is constructed to have a path and a point, it is most richly absorbed page by page, as individual insights are proposed and weighed. As with geometrical proofs, the grand conclusions may beckon, but the intellectual fiber of the book, the strands of reasoning which constitute its bulk and hold it together, lie in the closely argued details along the way. This makes it almost impossible to summarize but for the best of reasons: because it is so rich and intricately detailed.

Beyond that, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* is a response to Nietzsche's own bid for readers to take history seriously. By this, Nietzsche presumably meant among other things that the vocabulary and concepts with which we work are born in history, inflected and often transformed by historical shifts, and that to be unaware of this temporal dimension to our intellectual tools is to be dangerously uninformed. Emden's work provides an object lesson in this point of view. In that respect, his book is not only insightful in itself but might be taken almost as a model for how to follow Nietzsche's admonition when reading Nietzsche's own books.

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ⁱ *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* by Christian J. Emden (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 1.

ⁱⁱ Susanne Marchand has explored the interplay between classical learning and politics in general (but not specifically with regard to Nietzsche). See Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Ingo Gildenhard & Martin Ruehl, *Out of Arcadia: Classics and Politics in Germany in the Age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Wilamowitz* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Emden, *op. cit.* 30.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 27.

^v *Ibid*, 28.

^{vi} *Ibid*, 8. Emden's discussion of Nietzsche and *The Critique of Judgment* is explored more thoroughly on pp. 66-71. The third *Critique*, of course, affirms the use of teleological approaches, although only as a regulatory principle, when investigating organisms. In his "Teleology since Kant" Nietzsche explicitly rejects this approach. Emden, nevertheless, believes that "In Kant he finds the philosophical instruments to formulate a critique of the contemporary status of historical knowledge. . . ." 8.

^{vii} *Ibid*, 147.

^{viii} *Ibid*, 143.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 238.

^x *Ibid*, 257.

^{xi} Christian J. Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

^{xii} See Christa Acampora, "On Sovereignty and Overhumanity: Why It Matters How We Read Nietzsche's *Genealogy* II:2" in Christa Davis Acampora, ed. *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays* (London, Boulder, New York, Toronto,

Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006): 147-161. An earlier version of this paper appeared in *International Studies in Philosophy* 36:3 (Fall 2004): 127-45.