Democratizing Nietzsche


Why I Am Not a Secularist. By William E. Connolly. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) Referred to in the text as WNS.


Political scientists in the United States today are overwhelmingly—I am tempted to say, universally—democrats. There are of course conservatives, liberals, and radicals; utilitarians, neo-Kantians, and communitarians; defenders of the free market, of classical virtue, and of the oppressed. The list goes on. But to my knowledge, no one, including myself, seriously urges people to replace democratic government with some thoroughly undemocratic regime—with an aristocracy, for example, or theocracy, or monarchy. Scholars now consider any such position beyond the pale.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in contrast, was no democrat. Again and again in his writings, published as well as unpublished, he assails the increasingly democratic character of the modern age. And he propounds a very different alternative: not a return to traditional
hierarchies, but the breeding of a new class that will rule Europe and dominate the planet (cf. Beyond Good and Evil 208, 251). In the formulation offered by Georg Brandes and embraced by Nietzsche himself, Nietzsche’s political stance was one of “aristocratic radicalism.” “Every enhancement of the type ‘man,’” Nietzsche declares, “has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences of value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other” (BGE 257).

From these two points—we are democrats, while Nietzsche was radically antidemocratic—it would seem no great stretch to conclude that Nietzsche is among the most unpopular thinkers in the academy. But of course the opposite is true. Nietzsche is in no danger of being neglected, nor is he likely to be overshadowed for long by subsequent thinkers. Academics who would condemn a Nietzsche who happened to live among us, celebrate the real one who died just over a century ago. Most remarkable is that Nietzsche’s influence now extends to the very people who would presumably have the greatest objections to him: to political theorists, who view Nietzsche as a valuable resource for democratic politics.

Is this all one huge misunderstanding? Does it testify to that taste and facility for “lying” whereby we substitute our own, familiar opinions for whatever is alien and threatening (cf. BGE 192)? It would not be too surprising if this human, all-too-human tendency were to be found among political theorists; and indeed, those who wished to press Nietzsche into democratic service were slow to acknowledge his own politics. Eventually, however, they were compelled to do so, and the results have been illuminating—not only of Nietzsche, but potentially of democracy itself.

How the Democratic Nietzsche Finally Became a Fable
Given Nietzsche’s resounding attacks on democracy (see, e.g., BGE 202-3), it is very hard to argue that his stance is explicitly pro-democratic. Instead, scholars for many years took one of two well-traveled paths. Those who were not political theorists generally followed in the footsteps of Walter Kaufmann, who finds Nietzsche
to be critical of every sort of political commitment, democratic or otherwise. This “anti-political” reading was implicitly adopted even by those who otherwise distanced themselves from Kaufmann—by David B. Allison and other proponents of the Heideggerian “new Nietzsche,” for example, or by Alexander Nehamas in his account of “life as literature.” In truth, however, these readings were “anti-political” in name only, for their appeal lay precisely in their compatibility with liberal politics. Nietzsche’s profound spirituality could be celebrated insofar as it was kept safely private or, at most, exerted a merely cultural influence. Political theorists, meanwhile, pursued roughly the same goal, but no longer denied the connection between that goal and politics of some sort. Instead of beginning with what Nietzsche actually said about politics, however, these scholars began with other aspects of his thought—with his trenchant critique of all previous philosophy and theology, for example, or his celebration of the “free spirit”—and on that basis formulated a politics fit for democratic consumption. One could then discuss certain passages, including Nietzsche’s description of “the state” as “the coldest of all cold monsters” (“On the New Idol”) while saying nothing at all of others, such as his praise of aristocratic society. Sometimes the results were fruitful enough, as for example Leslie Paul Thiele’s study of Nietzsche’s “heroic individualism.” But even in such cases the engagement with Nietzschean politics remained incomplete. Having neglected Nietzsche’s own antidemocratic thrust, political theorists also failed to explain why, despite Nietzsche, they themselves saw fit to render his thinking compatible with democracy. No justification was deemed necessary.

One early study would seem to be an exception. In *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, Tracy B. Strong delves into an impressive array of texts in order to challenge the prevailing “anti-political” readings. Strong’s book promises to examine everything in Nietzsche’s politics that makes us uncomfortable, including his talk of “master races” and insistence on the necessity of “breeding.” And, what is indeed striking, Strong does note Nietzsche’s criticism of modern democracy. What Nietzsche means by such attacks, however, is apparently not so shocking after all. His objections are to the
modern state, with its attending asceticism, atomization, and division of labor—objections, that is to say, which many democrats are proud to make. Other Nietzschean objections, such as his rejection of social equality, are passed over. As for Nietzsche’s affirmative thought, Strong focuses on his early, unpublished writings, particularly “Homer’s Contest.” The “contest,” or _agon_ in Greek, was a fruitful sort of strife that took place in the community’s public space. Now as Strong indicates, this account of political action comes not simply from Nietzsche, but from Nietzsche by way of Hannah Arendt. Nietzsche himself frames agonistic politics within an _aristocratic_ society, one that takes its “measure” from stern traditional laws, celebrates and regenerates its hierarchies, and crushes the hopes (and occasionally the bodies) of lower classes and also-rans. To the extent that Strong acknowledges this—and it is hard to avoid entirely—he is quick to reassure us: “Nietzsche does not think...the aim of man to be modeled on the Homeric ‘master’ races. In the end, neither the heroic, nor the concomitant master morality remain possible.” Though Strong concludes with an informative survey of Nietzsche’s hopes for politics in the coming century, he casts those hopes merely as a desperate bid to get Europeans and the rest of the world to affirm the doctrine of the eternal return, rather than as following from Nietzsche’s account of aristocratic society as the necessary condition of “every enhancement of the type ‘man.’” Even Strong, therefore, blunts the edges of Nietzsche’s aristocratic politics. But as we will see, his account of the Greek _agon_ would pave the way for another generation of democratic Nietzscheans.

Decisive change would come in the 1990s with the publication of Bruce Detwiler’s _Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism_, still the best discussion of Nietzschean politics as a whole. In the wake of Detwiler came several other interpreters stressing Nietzsche’s opposition to modern democracy, including Gerald M. Mara, Suzanne L. Dovi, Thomas Heilke, Ruth Abbey, and Frederick Appel. On the Continental side, meanwhile, Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, and others took previous French readings to task for failing to acknowledge the anti-democratic and anti-rational elements of Nietzsche’s thought. The point of all these corrections
is not merely to “get Nietzsche right”; still less is it to advocate Nietzschean politics. Rather, as Frederick Appel explains, it is “to invite democracy’s friends to face the depth of his challenge head-on with a reasoned and effective defense of democratic ideals.”

Insofar as proponents of the earlier political approach to Nietzsche—the old new Nietzsche, as it were—began to acknowledge the depth of his challenge to democracy, they found themselves in an awkward position, one nicely illustrated by Keith Ansell-Pearson’s *Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*. Ansell-Pearson does make a point of summarizing Nietzsche’s critique of liberal democracy and affirmation of radically aristocratic politics. But he still holds out for an individualistic doctrine that would sit more easily with democracy. “I would argue that there are essentially two kinds of politics Nietzsche offers his readers. One is a less well-known ‘politics of survival’, which consists not in legislating new values and law-tables to man, but in playing in parodic and ironic fashion with the ideals of humanity. ... The other is the more familiar ‘politics of cruelty’ associated with Nietzsche’s aristocratic radicalism.” The two alternatives are indeed so evenly matched that “it is not possible to say which of the two Nietzsche wished to promote”—since, it must be admitted, the textual evidence in Nietzsche’s final phase is so “fragmentary and incomplete.” And the news gets worse. “Unfortunately, nowhere in his published output does Nietzsche develop at length, or even in outline, the possibilities contained in this challenging conception of the self and of social life.” No wonder Ansell-Pearson complains of the “fragmentary and incomplete” state of Nietzsche’s writings: only in odd scraps can he find any evidence of the “politics of survival.” And yet that is the “conception of the self and of social life” which Ansell-Pearson himself clearly wants to highlight—not, I suspect, because it is the more challenging.

Rather than twist themselves into such contortions, political theorists in recent years have been more willing to grant that Nietzsche’s own political views are antidemocratic. Not everyone, however, has simply met the depth of his challenge head-on, as Frederick Appel urges us to do. Some have pursued a more oblique but nevertheless intriguing alternative, arguing that key elements of
Nietzschean philosophy have more democratic possibilities than Nietzsche himself ever admits. Nietzsche is still to be democratized, but now the transformation is to be explicit, the justification clear. Thus we have an excellent opportunity to investigate what fundamental premises, if any, could cause Nietzschean philosophy to tilt wildly one way or another, towards democracy or its opposite.

This most recent generation of democratic readings is of more than one kind. Richard E. Flathman, for example, turns to Nietzsche for the nerve of his “willful liberalism” despite Nietzsche’s “own judgment that he was an opponent, even an enemy, of individuality-affirming liberalism.” More common, however, is for the post-Nietzschean democrats to present themselves as critics of liberalism, even while distinguishing themselves from the communitarian critics who famously engaged Rawlsian liberalism during the 1980s. Known generally as “agonal” or “agonistic” democracy, the anti-communitarian alternative to liberalism picks up where Tracy Strong’s political theory leaves off. It has been advanced by a number of scholars, including Bonnie Honig, Lawrence J. Hatab, and David Owen. For present purposes, however, I will focus on one theorist whose attempt to democratize Nietzsche is especially ambitious, thoughtful, and honest.

The Case of Connolly
For more than a decade, William E. Connolly has taken the lead in propounding a post-Nietzschean theory of democracy. A prolific writer with unusually diverse interests, Connolly develops his political theory in a series of studies whose topics range from the theology of Saint Augustine to current developments in neuroscience. Among those writings, *Identity/ Difference* (ID) stands out as most comprehensive and best known. In seeking the foundations of his appropriation of Nietzsche, however, I will also turn to other works, including the earlier *Political Theory and Modernity* (PTM) and the later *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (WNS).

Connolly acknowledges as a key predecessor Tracy B. Strong, who “clarifies many dimensions of Nietzsche’s work and thinks about a political position which could draw upon it without lapsing
into a renewal of aristocraticism” (PTM 213). Yet Connolly takes greater pains than Strong to mention that this means he rejects Nietzsche on key points:

There are plenty of ways I dissent from Nietzsche: his cultural aristocracy, which prizes becoming and plurality among a “noble” (though not necessarily moneyed) few while condemning “the herd” to a cultural dogmatism it is said to be predisposed toward; his (sometimes appealing) fantasy of residing on the margin of society beyond the reach of organized politics; his tendency (following from the first two themes) to neglect the politics of becoming in favor of cultivating individual distinctiveness; his profound ambivalence toward the basis and effects of gender duality; his periodic delight in petty cruelty against carriers of ressentiment; his occasional expressions of regret that people are no longer prepared to be “stones” in a cultural edifice; and so on. (WNS 56)

Like Strong, Connolly appropriates Nietzsche’s rediscovery of the agon with the assistance of a twentieth-century mediator. But while Strong’s Nietzsche is uncovered through a dialogue with Hannah Arendt, Connolly’s comes by way of Michel Foucault. And as a result, instead of Strong’s invocation of a “public space,” we find in Connolly something much closer to what Ronald Beiner aptly calls Foucault’s “hyper-liberalism.” Perhaps even Connolly’s frankness can be attributed in part to this divergence: it was Foucault who famously declared that his reading makes Nietzsche “groan and protest.”

What then does Connolly mean by “agonal” democracy? The word might conjure images of democratic society in its death throes, torn apart by factions vying for supremacy—Liberia as the ideal. But of course Connolly anticipates nothing of the sort. He does, however, envision a tumultuous and rather fierce contest among individuals and groups within society.

For Connolly, some version of that contest is necessary in any case. Failure to come to grips with its necessity is, in his view, the problem on which liberalism and communitarianism both founder.
Liberals such as John Rawls had admitted that society contains any number of differing conceptions of the good that potentially come into conflict. What liberalism sought was not some *summum bonum*, but principles of justice that would be neutral with respect to diverse goods and thus win the consent of all. Like the communitarian critics before him, Connolly declares that quest a failure. Liberalism does, in fact, have its own particular conception of how it is best to live; the language of neutrality serves only to mask that commitment, even from liberals themselves. Such difficulties would eventually force Rawls to retract his claim to have discovered uncontroversial foundations for liberalism (ID 73; ID 93, 160-2; WNS 194-5).

But the communitarians, Connolly continues, have problems of their own. Superficially, their position comes to sight as no more than “civic liberalism,” with its abiding emphasis on rationalism and rights. Yet the communitarians do differ from liberals in explicitly seeking to bridge individual concerns by a “common good” that derives from a community’s shared history. Here is where Connolly poses several difficult questions:

What justifies the exclusions, penalties, restrictions, and incentives needed to sustain adherence to this common good on the part of those who might otherwise deviate from it? What if some would significantly shift priorities within the sanctified circle of implications if they had the power to do so? What if commonly established assumptions about the capacity for realization of the embodied self in a higher community encounter persistent resistances in many selves to these forms of self-organization? What if the circle of discourse in which these commonalities are articulated closes out other possibilities that would disturb, unsettle, fragment, ambiguiate, politicize the achieved sense of unity if they were to find expression? (ID 88-9)

In order to head off such possibilities, “the most reflective civic humanists” make their own appeal to principles that rise above the fray. Charles Taylor (the political theorist), for example, admits that his own political theory conceives of human beings as directed towards shared self-understanding by “a direction in being.” Connolly
professes that he has no wish “to protest this dimension of Taylor’s work as such,” yet in doing so he makes a point of calling Taylor’s fundamental assumption a “reflective projection.” That is to say, Connolly can respectfully grapple with that assumption so long as it is understood to be a projection from within Taylor’s “affirmative theory of politics” onto or into the realm of being or metaphysics (ID 90). Although such projections are unavoidable, in Connolly’s view (ID 67), they are also “essentially contested concepts” (cf. TPD 225-231). Those wishing to challenge communitarian theories may draw “supplemental sustenance from another social ontology, one in which the fit between human designs and the material drawn into those designs is always partial, incomplete, and likely to contain an element of subjugation and imposition” (ID 91).

That “social ontology” is, of course, the one affirmed by Connolly himself, and it informs his central account of how “identity” is forged out of “difference.” Human beings begin with a primordial awareness of any number of differences that exist among people. As Connolly repeatedly acknowledges, however, the world of mere difference, unmodified by interpretation, is uninhabitable: in order to live decisively and have confidence in themselves, human beings need to define who they are, give themselves an identity (ID 50, 158, 221). In taking this step they draw upon their primary awareness of difference, but they also transform it, impose an idealistic interpretation upon it. When a group says, “We are such-and-such,” they declare those differences that remain among themselves to be either unimportant or impermissible, and they spotlight further differences that distinguish themselves from those who are to be excluded. Thus “identity” and “the other” are both socio-politically constructed out of difference (ID 64-5).

This account has two crucial implications. In the first place, it means that the categories with which we define ourselves and others are necessarily crude approximations to the phenomena. Those defined as outsiders may happen to share any number of similarities with some members of the identified group—as, for example, two who are separated by categories of race and gender may both weigh 300 pounds and share a passion for chess. Nor are the highlighted
differences themselves so clear-cut. Although it is convenient to say that one person’s desires are heterosexual and another’s homosexual, there are in fact any number of variations from individual to individual, and even within the same individual (ID 176; WNS 62-3). Hence an unavoidable arbitrariness in our distinguishing one type of human being from another. Second, and still more important in Connolly’s view, is the role that difference itself plays in establishing identity. Because identity and otherness are constructed through the same act of definition and out of the same experience of difference, identity needs otherness for its very existence. A heterosexual, for example, would not be heterosexual, would not have that identity, were it not for the various differences in erotic attraction that allow him to define certain other people as homosexual. If nobody were “gay,” I could not possibly be “straight” (ID 177).

When Connolly’s genealogy “brackets teleotranscendental legitimations of established dualities in order to problematize established frames within which social and theoretical debates over these issues have been set” (ID 181), the goal is not only theoretical, but practical. Insofar as identity is merely the historical creation of human beings rather than a natural telos or divinely legislated vocation, it is open to negotiation or disputation; no longer can it claim a place above the fray. The consequences of this are revolutionary. Denied their metaphysical moats and drawbridges, the authorities will have no choice but to face ever bolder advances from those they had scorned. One might well expect a civil war of discourse, and not only of discourse, to erupt. For Connolly, however, that war was started long ago. Here Connolly’s thought is truly radical in its implications: branding someone as “the other” may not draw any blood, but it attacks something still deeper in him, that which does not fit the norm. Were the genealogy of identity to provoke a new Terror, therefore, the violence would only have emerged into daylight, having for so long been formalized, normalized, and rendered invisible by authoritative discourse.

But I see little sign that Connolly expects to be the Rousseau to a new Robespierre; he appears indeed to think the possibility unworthy of serious concern. This is precisely because he locates the
truly murderous violence in the old categories of identity and otherness. Disrupt those categories, and the venom will drain away, leaving in its place an affirmative attitude. Far from being a war of all against all, agonal democracy will be the unprecedented flowering of “agonistic respect” (ID 14-16, 166-67). Connolly’s genealogy is itself intended as an education in such respect: whoever sees that his own identity depends for its very definition on “the other,” soon loses his appetite for the other’s destruction. A certain rivalry remains, to be sure, but one informed by the awareness that each side is made more interesting, formidable, and beautiful by its counterpart. While those who assume that “only a theory of deep identity can provide a source of ethics” may see genealogy as merely destructive, “The genealogist sees her own enterprise differently. She replaces the vertical line that culminates in a transcendental command with one that cultivates a care for identity and difference already operative in life through accentuation of the experience of contingency” (ID 182). Thus Connolly expects his genealogy to promote a curious mixture of ferocity and care, emulation and gratitude, chaos and harmony. Within a society practicing the “ethos of engagement” (WNS 153-61), new growths of individuality would jostle one another, test each other, and flourish. Such “deep diversity” is what characterizes the agonal democracy that Connolly celebrates (WNS 184-7).

A Debt to Nietzsche

Connolly’s political theory is undeniably Nietzschean in significant respects. Its critical thrust follows Nietzsche’s memorable attack on “the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians,” namely, “the faith in opposite values” such as truth and error, truthfulness and mendacity, and selflessness and selfishness. Nietzsche questions whether the opposites really are opposite at all, and whether one need follow the popular estimations of their value. “It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things—maybe even one with them in essence. Maybe!” (BGE 2).
As for Connolly’s genealogy of identity in particular, we find a striking parallel in Zarathustra’s speech, “Of the Thousand Goals and One”:

Zarathustra saw many lands and many peoples: thus he discovered the good and evil of many peoples. And Zarathustra found no greater power on earth than good and evil.

No people could live without first esteeming; but if they want to preserve themselves, then they must not esteem as the neighbor esteems. Much that was good to one people was scorn and infamy to another: Thus I found it. Much I found called evil here, and decked out with purple honors there. Never did one neighbor understand the other; ever was his soul amazed at the neighbor’s delusion and wickedness.

A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power....

Whatever makes them rule and triumph and shine, to the awe and envy of their neighbors, that is to them the high, the first, the measure, the meaning of all things.

Verily, my brother, once you have recognized the need and land and sky and neighbor of a people, you may also guess the law of their overcomings, and why they climb to their hope on this ladder.

What a people “esteems” is inscribed, Zarathustra says, in its “tablet of the good.” The phrase evokes the Ten Commandments in all their seeming permanence and divine authority. But Zarathustra’s speech implies, to the contrary, that no people’s law is written in stone by the finger of God. “The law of their overcomings” is determined instead by the need to survive and triumph over hostile neighbors. Though the law itself is indispensable, its content is shockingly or
ridiculously arbitrary, consisting in roughly the opposite of whatever those neighbors happen to esteem. In Connolly’s terms, human beings create a distinct identity by using certain differences to distinguish themselves from “the other.”

Connolly’s goal of emancipating individuals from oppressive conformism also resonates with a certain side of Nietzsche. One sign of this is that in the same speech, Zarathustra eventually stops speaking of “peoples” and substitutes a much uglier word, “herds.” The phenomenon of “esteeming” may be distinctive of human beings, but its distinctiveness remains incomplete so long as it serves the self-preservation and power of the collective. This thought is developed and greatly amplified in *Beyond Good and Evil*. “Clans, communities, tribes, peoples, states, churches” are all examples of the “herds of men” that have existed “as long as there have been human beings.” During those untold millennia, “nothing has been exercised and bred better and longer among men so far than obedience”; and as a result, the *need* for obedience “is now innate in the average man, as a kind of *formal conscience* that commands: ‘thou shalt unconditionally do something, unconditionally not do something else,’ in short, ‘thou shalt’” (BGE 199). Now, one might wish to think that liberal society, with its representative form of government and pervasive mistrust of “the lust to rule,” has at last managed to free us from the obedience of the herd. Not so, in Nietzsche’s view. He insists, to the contrary, that precisely here “herd animal morality” dominates in a more radical form than ever before, as “herd timidity”:

High and independent spirituality, the will to stand alone, even the great reason are experienced as dangers; everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor is henceforth called *evil*; and the fair, modest, submissive, conforming mentality, the *mediocrity* of desires attains moral designations and honors. (BGE 201)

Nietzsche indeed observes something rather like the “direction in being” of which Charles Taylor speaks—an impulse that causes communities of human beings to produce common experiences and
self-understandings. But he evaluates this development rather differently from the communitarians:

The human beings who are more similar, more ordinary, have had, and always have, an advantage; those more select, subtle, strange, and difficult to understand, easily remain alone, succumb to accidents, being isolated, and rarely propagate. One must invoke tremendous counter-forces in order to cross this natural, all too natural progressus in simile, the continual development of man toward the similar, ordinary, average, herdlike—common! (BGE 268)

And so the last chapter of Beyond Good and Evil ("What is Noble?") describes the pains that profound individuals take to shield themselves from the crowd. “Solitude is a virtue for us,” Nietzsche says, “as a sublime bent and urge for cleanliness which guesses how all contact between man and man—‘in society’—involves inevitable uncleanness. All community makes men—somehow, somewhere, sometime ‘common’” (BGE 284; cf. 270-2).

And yet, despite Nietzsche’s warnings about “the herd,” it must be said that the picture presented in “Of the Thousand Goals and One” is largely attractive: out of the simple, universal, and herdlike, out of the fierce struggle among peoples, a wondrous tapestry of culture spreads before us:

“You shall always be the first and excel all others; your jealous soul shall love no one, unless it be the friend”—that made the soul of the Greek quiver: thus he walked the path of his greatness.

“To speak the truth and to handle bow and arrow well”—that seemed both dear and difficult to the people who gave me my name—the name which is both dear and difficult to me.

“To honor father and mother and to follow their will to the root of one’s soul”—this was the tablet of overcoming that another people hung up over themselves and became powerful and eternal thereby.
“To practice loyalty and, for the sake of loyalty, to risk honor and
blood even for evil and dangerous things”—with this teaching
another people conquered themselves; and through this self-
conquest they became pregnant and heavy with great hopes.”

Now, one might well ask whether the beauty of what Zarathustra
describes is ever fully acknowledged by Connolly. But it does find
some place, at least. We have seen that Connolly considers identity
to be more than a source of reassurance or a vehicle of resentment;
it is necessary for life in the fullest sense. And this is true even of
group identity. Neither Connolly nor Nietzsche would much admire
multiculturalism as it exists in ordinary liberal society—the
unthreatening, consumer-friendly multiculturalism of trendy res-

taurants, token holidays, and yoga classes. The difference between
Connolly’s agonal democracy and Zarathustra’s thousand peoples
amounts to this: agonal democracy itself includes a multitude of
individual and group identities, each engaging with and challenging
all the others. The question, then, is whether the individual who
 evade illiberal obedience can, in the midst of such wildly diverse
influences, compose and enact a life that fits his own peculiar
nature and shines forth as genuinely high or noble. Connolly’s
polemic against authoritative identities requires that the answer be
yes.

For the basis of this optimism, we return to Connolly’s meta-
physical assumptions or “social ontology.” As we recall, Connolly
holds that “the fit between human designs and the material drawn
into those designs is always partial, incomplete, and likely to contain
an element of subjugation and imposition” (ID 91). Connolly is right
to trace this view to Nietzsche. For Nietzsche’s clearest statement to
this effect, we turn to aphorism 9 of Beyond Good and Evil, quoted
by Connolly as follows:

“Think of a being like Nature, immoderately wasteful, immoder-
ately indifferent, devoid of intentions and considerateness..., 
fruitful and desolate and uncertain at the same time. ... Living—
 isn’t it precisely a wishing to be different from this Nature?
Doesn’t living mean evaluating, preferring, being unjust, wanting to be different?” (ID 49-50)

And so Nietzsche ridicules the “philosophical idealist,” as Connolly puts it, who “wants to treat his categories as if they mirrored reality.” Again quoting Nietzsche:

> While rapturously pretending to read the canon of your law out of nature, you actually want the opposite—you strange play-actors and self-deceivers! Your pride wants to dictate your morality, your ideal, to nature (even to nature!)...; you want to remake all existence in order to mirror your own existence. (ID 50)

For Connolly, the implication is clear: whatever does not fit human designs is worthy of agonistic respect and deserves to emerge from behind the imposed categories of identity and otherness. While Connolly’s Nietzsche understands the human need to organize nature, he is perfectly willing to undermine such efforts. “It is because theory is indispensable to living and yet never exhaustive of what it organizes that Nietzsche develops strategies to enable discourses, theories, identities, conceptions of goodness and utility to disturb, unsettle, and disrupt the closures toward which they tend” (*ibid*).

Connolly understands nature to be ever flowing, ever elusive, and recalcitrant; and he sides with nature, thus understood, against all conventional “closures,” however necessary those closures may temporarily be. In an especially revealing reading of Zarathustra’s speech, “Of Old and New Tablets,” Connolly argues that this is Nietzsche’s view as well. First, let us remind ourselves of the passage, as quoted by Connolly:

> When the water is spanned by planks, when bridges and railings leap over the river, verily those are believed who say, “Everything is in flux....” But when the winter comes..., then verily, not only the blockheads say, “Does not everything stand still?”

> “At bottom everything stands still”—that is truly a winter doc-
trine.... O my brothers, is everything not in flux now? Have not all railings and bridges fallen into the water? Who could not still cling to “good” and “evil”? ... The thawing wind blows... thus preach in every street, my brothers. (WNS 53)

Although Connolly remarks that “winter thoughts keep reinstating themselves in ways that treat the cultural ice as if it were frozen all the way down,” and indeed that “you cannot dispense with [winter doctrines] altogether or finally,” he finds Zarathustra’s emphatic point to be this: “Things are mobile at bottom, rather than still or fixed.” This is the “positive metaphysic” that supports post-Nietzschean politics—what Connolly in this chapter terms “the politics of becoming.” Though some will suffer the loss of their winter doctrines, Connolly’s Nietzsche turns his back on them, reserving his compassion for whatever is “suffocated by the normalizing politics of ‘good and evil’”; “it is ‘compassion, in other words, against compassion’” (WNS 56, quoting BGE 225). He is eager to see new instances of identity/difference that emerge when congealed categories once again begin to flow. And if the ice is slow in breaking, he reaches for hammer and pick, eager to help it along.

Contesting Nietzsche
As we have noted, however, Connolly admits that Nietzsche’s own version of “the politics of becoming” differs from his own political theory. How exactly does Connolly understand this difference, and how does he justify his selective appropriation?

Connolly distances himself from Nietzsche in two steps. In the first place, he propounds a specific reading of Nietzsche’s “aristocratism.” In this step Connolly already sets aside the Nietzsche who celebrates “mastery” or “domination” (ID 185; PTM 161). The aristocratic order of rank need not mean the rule of some over others; it may only be a cultural ranking of some as more valuable than others. Noble human beings, as Connolly’s Nietzsche understands them, are rare, profound individuals who live on the fringes of society, far from the threats and vulgarities of “the herd.” The “overman” and the “free spirit” are essentially the same type (ID 186;
Thus Connolly still makes something like Ansell-Pearson’s distinction between a “politics of domination” and a “politics of survival.” As we have seen, however, Connolly does a better job of linking his reading with something real in Nietzsche’s writings, namely the type of the solitary free spirit. At the same time, Connolly admits that Nietzsche’s political philosophy can be read otherwise, as indeed praising political domination. But Nietzsche, he asserts, is sufficiently “protean” as to admit of multiple readings (ID 185). And unless one means to use Nietzsche as a kind of bogeyman, scaring people into accepting liberal rationalism without question, why would one insist on that particular reading which privileges a politics that we democrats loathe (ID 185)? Connolly’s Nietzsche, in contrast, is to be taken seriously as a genuine alternative to liberals and communitarians alike.

He also challenges Connolly’s own political theory, however, for the solitary free spirit differs from the agonistic democrat. Hence it is necessary for Connolly to take a second step. He must explain why engaging with others in society, respectfully but vigorously challenging their identities while opening oneself to the same, is better than trying to stand apart from and above them. Here is where Connolly acknowledges the importance of Foucault in his thought. It is only with Foucault, he asserts, that one realizes just how powerful the forces of conformity really are. Today, modern technology provides new means of social communication and state-sponsored surveillance, and the discourse of individual rights, self-reliance, and therapeutic treatment run throughout society. There is simply nowhere to hide; anyone who tried to do so would only fall prey to that very resentment which he meant to transcend. And so, if the free-spirited “overman” ever was a possible human type, it certainly is not one anymore. If Nietzsche were alive today, he would in all likelihood grasp the enormity of our predicament and realize that solitude is no longer an option (PTM 159-60; ID 187-90; WNS 56).

Anyone familiar with Nietzsche’s attacks on democracy will be surprised to read that he underestimated the power of “the herd.” In truth, Connolly and Foucault do no more than analyze the present
disaster that Nietzsche already describes in the most lurid terms. Nietzsche already implies that there is nowhere to hide when he warns of the “degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal” (BGE 203). As Detwiler observes, Nietzsche understands man to be the “as yet undetermined animal,” which means that human nature itself is still changeable, hence susceptible to being replaced by something subhuman. This is precisely why Nietzsche thinks democracy must be replaced with aristocracy—not merely one of culture, but a political aristocracy as well, ruled covertly but absolutely by philosophic “leaders” (Führer: see BGE 203; cf. 60, 257, 263). Understandably, therefore, Connolly makes a second Foucaultian response to Nietzsche: aristocracy, whether in the solitary-cultural or in the political sense, is not needed. Foucault, Connolly says, “shifts the center of gravity of Nietzschean discourse from heroes and classical tragic figures to everyday misfits such as Alex/Alexina and Pierre Rivière. These textual moves are, I think, part of a strategy to fold Nietzschean agonism into the fabric of ordinary life by attending to the extraordinary character of the latter. I seek to pursue this same trail” (ID 187). Indeed, even within the “existential suffering” that gives rise to oppressive categories of identity and otherness, a form of suffering that Nietzsche found “offensive and dangerous,” he “might better have striven to find positive possibilities” (WNS 56; cf. ID 190-1). Behind every seemingly fixed identity is the always shifting play of difference, which in every instance is worthy of interest and agonistic respect.

Finally, Connolly appears certain that political aristocracy is just not possible today: a democratic world it is, and such it will remain. That, at any rate, would explain why he speaks with a sort of fatality that the non-mastering alternative “seems to me to be a more promising stance to explore in the closing decade of the twentieth century” (PTM 161). Oddly enough, this is a point where Connolly would have both Nietzsche and the liberals against him. Both would say that Connolly underestimates the dangerousness of a radical critique of established identities. “I am no man,” Nietzsche declares in a famous passage of Ecce Homo; “I am dynamite.”
... For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has never been dreamed of. The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows great politics. (EH "Why I am a Destiny," 1)

When Connolly, in contrast, proposes to undermine the conventional, traditional, ancient order of things, he speaks of no cataclysmic consequences. Some disruptions can of course be expected, but there will be no Hobbesian war of all against all, or even a Lockean war of some fanatics, criminals, and clans against others. Instead, Connolly expects the rivalries themselves to foster, and to be limited by, a new, sincere form of respect. In this chaotic yet caring environment, individuals will manifest a dazzling array of differences that never would have developed under their previous constraints. These assumptions are, of course, not entirely new: they resemble what liberals themselves had claimed while challenging the old, patriarchal, church-bound, premodern society. Yet Connolly carries those claims much further, redirecting them against the very institutions that had previously guarded against the *summum malum*.

Connolly’s position, then, is a most unusual one: it is attacked by the political philosopher whom he otherwise follows, and defended by a rationalism which he attacks himself. We have already remarked upon Connolly’s optimism; and now that we see how controversial or “contested” it is, let us return to the question of its basis.

**The Foundations of Agonal Democracy**

As we have seen, Connolly acknowledges that his own political theory, like any other, rests on essentially contestable metaphysical concepts. It is time to examine those concepts more closely in hopes of laying bare the foundations of his disagreement with Nietzsche.

Let us first consider a deeper level where Connolly sides with Foucault against Nietzsche. As Connolly observes, Foucault delib-
erately drops Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power (ID 187). Connolly does the same. At the very least, he interprets Nietzsche’s doctrine in a way that makes room for gentler forms of power: “To link knowledge to power is not to say that knowledge simply is power and power simply is domination. Power now becomes a more labile term: the will to power is the will to give form to something and to fix it in its form despite resistances it may offer” (PTM 144). Speaking in his own name, however, Connolly goes further: the concern for power arises only after identity is constituted out of raw difference; it is not said to be the original motive for that transformation. Nor does Connolly appear to think the concern for power necessary at all. It is specifically the non-agonistic formulation of identity—the type that insists on the truth of identity, authoritatively and permanently excluding differences as “the other”—that seeks power over others (ID 65-6, 206-7). This, of course, differs from Nietzsche’s view. As we recall from the speech “Of the Thousand Goals and One,” what spurs each people to define itself against its neighbors, esteeming its own distinctive “tablet of the good,” is the will to power. And Nietzsche vehemently protests against any attempt to soften what this means:

Here we must beware of superficiality and get to the bottom of the matter, resisting all sentimental weakness: life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation—but why should one always use those words in which a slanderous intent has been imprinted for ages? ... “Exploitation” does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will to life. If this should be an innovation as a theory—as a reality it is the primordial fact [das Ur-Faktum] of all history: people ought to be honest with themselves at least that far. (BGE 259)

It is clear, then, that Nietzsche would wish to dismiss Connolly as superficial, sentimental, weak, and dishonest. But his most funda-
mental challenge would be that Connolly simply misses “the primordial fact of all history.”

Connolly’s implicit denial of that alleged fact affects his reading of aphorism 9 of *Beyond Good and Evil* (see pp. 15-16, above). Although it is true that Nietzsche there ridicules the Stoics for trying to read their own ideal into nature, he by no meanslavishes his greatest praise on the nature that they impose themselves upon. Nature, thus understood, is merely “indifference itself,” and it is admirable for human beings to wrest it to their own purposes. As this is a potentially troublesome line of analysis, Connolly finds it convenient to skip the end of Nietzsche’s aphorism:

But this is an ancient, eternal story: what formerly happened with the Stoics still happens today, too, as soon as any philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise. Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the “creation of the world,” to the *causa prima*.

Here Nietzsche does not seem exactly to be rooting for recalcitrant nature; instead, he shifts into a thrilling portrait of philosophy as the greatest imaginable tyranny over indifference.

Despite the difficulties in Connolly’s reading of aphorism 9, he is right about this: Nietzsche at times looks to nature as a positive standard. Even then, however, Nietzsche’s nature differs from what Connolly envisions. Later in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche speaks of “the moral imperative of nature” (BGE 188). And if a natural “moral imperative” already sounds foreign to Connolly’s political theory, all the more so is its content: obedience. Worst of all, from Connolly’s perspective, is the kind of obedience that Nietzsche means: submitting to laws that are arbitrary, capricious, and sometimes personally deadly. Destructive though such obedience often is, Nietzsche insists that it is necessary for the development of “peoples, races, ages, classes,” and “the whole human animal” above all. Not only does Nietzsche think it “natural,” as one might say, to impose oneself tyrannically upon others (cf. BGE 259); he also thinks it natural—and says so explicitly—for those others to
be imposed upon, because that is how humanity as a whole becomes more beautiful and profound.

Never in a million years would Connolly speak of this “moral imperative of nature.” Not that Connolly himself avoids making assumptions about nature or “reflective projections” into the realm of metaphysics. We have seen that he admits such a need. But his view of nature is very different from Nietzsche’s. To gain some clarity about this crucial issue, let us return to Connolly’s discussion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Of Old and New Tablets,” section 8. As we recall, Zarathustra ridicules those who see that the world is now “frozen,” with each thing seemingly fixed, and who on that basis conclude, “At bottom everything stands still.” Connolly takes this to mean that Nietzsche himself agrees with others whom Zarathustra mentions, those who say, to the contrary: “Everything is in flux.” This reading is understandable; it is not necessary, however, nor do I think it correct. For Zarathustra does not, after all, say in his own name that everything is in flux. Instead he says, “O my brothers, is not everything in flux now?” Zarathustra describes a reality that comprehends summer and winter, torrent and ice, flux and stillness. Moreover, the order of the seasons itself combines motion (never does the cycle stop) with rest (the cycle is ever the same). The thawing wind may blow, but some day hence the freezing wind must follow. Each season eternally returns.

Translated back from Nietzsche’s metaphor, the political contrast can be stated as follows. Connolly may well be right that agonistic democracy rests on a metaphysic of flux. It is not only necessary, in Connolly’s view, that fixed categories and hierarchies break down, emancipating what had previously been constrained or kept down. It is also desirable that this happen, because the emerging expression of difference is bound to be an improvement. Nietzsche disagrees. For him, freedom has its season, but so does the strictest sort of obedience. Freedom is indeed the result of obedience, and renewed obedience (through being conquered, for example; cf. BGE 257) the result of freedom. There is nothing to be gained in rebelling against this “moral imperative,” for the relationship between obedience and human flourishing is not a matter for
human beings to decide. The relationship is necessary; it stems from the natural order of things.

These, therefore, are the alternative assumptions that cause Nietzschean political philosophy to tilt either towards radically aristocratic politics, as Nietzsche himself supposed, or towards democratic politics. Or as Connolly himself would put it, these are the “essentially contested concepts” or “reflective projections” that come into agonistic conflict with one another. But since the notion of agonistic conflict itself belongs to Connolly’s political theory, one may ask what it would mean to contest his assumptions through and through. Perhaps it would have to mean no longer “contesting” at all, but wondering what are the facts concerning nature. And perhaps this result would be neither democratic nor radically aristocratic—and hence not Nietzschean—but liberal in the highest, truest sense.