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Anas Karzai, **Nietzsche and Sociology: Prophet of Affirmation**. London: Lexington Books, 2019. pp. 221. ISBN: 9780739150511 (cloth: alk. paper)

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In *Nietzsche and Sociology: Prophet of Affirmation*, Anas Karzai attempts to revive and defend the thesis that there is a crucial yet neglected connection between Nietzsche and sociology. In particular, Karzai's book discusses the relevance of Nietzsche's critical reflections on society and culture to modern sociological theory, which descends from Kant and Comte through Marx and Engels to Durkheim and Weber. The book has a critical agenda as well. By making use of Nietzsche's insights into society, culture, and politics, Karzai hopes to expose how modern sociological theory retains many of the assumptions and approaches that gained a foothold during the reign of orthodox positivism of the 19th century, which reflect traditional sociology's stubborn preoccupation with the issues of social order and moral integration.

Karzai's thesis about Nietzsche's relevance to sociology should come as unsurprising to most scholars even slightly familiar with Nietzsche's works (especially his later writings). Indeed Nietzsche's works are almost always brimmed with reflections on the formation of societal and cultural values and their implications for individuals as well as the existing social order. Even though Nietzsche is perceived primarily and widely as a philosopher, Karzai notes, his relevance to sociology should not be diminished by this fact. Karzai makes this point clear in the introduction: "As this study reveals, Nietzsche was not just a philosopher. He was also a critic of culture, a critic of civilization and politics, a poet, a historian of ideas, and a sociological thinker in his own right" (xiii). And it is this latter aspect of Nietzsche's identity with which Karzai is exclusively concerned in this book.

The book is composed of three parts. The first, entitled 'Genealogical Imprints,' offers a series of quick comparative analyses between Nietzsche's social philosophy and modern sociological systems, detailing Nietzsche's deep influence on and connection to writers such as Foucault, Adorno, and Weber.

The second part consists of two chapters. The first of these, Chapter 4, explores "the sociological affinity between Nietzsche and Marx" (74) within the framework of a historical-materialist understanding of the crisis of Enlightenment values and capitalist modernity. The second one, Chapter 5, devotes particular attention to exposing the

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shortcomings of Comte's and Durkheim's positivistic theories of society from a Nietzschean critical perspective.

The third and final part of the book attempts to sketch an outline of a Nietzschean critical sociology of knowledge. The immediate task of such a critical theory is to dispel the illusions of modernity (such as the ideal of civilization or the idea of continuous progress and the vision of economic growth). Here the aim is to facilitate an emancipatory awareness in individuals which may result in greater self-understanding and liberation from ideological oppression, dominating institutions and structures.

Three positive aspects of the book especially stand out. First and foremost, Karzai correctly observes that Nietzsche is a complex and multifaceted thinker who raised fundamental questions about society, culture, and politics that cannot be approached from a single theoretical perspective or discipline. Karzai claims that Nietzsche's acute sociological awareness and sociopolitical insights have been simply ignored within the context of modern academic disciplinarity and rigid compartmentalization of discourse – a phenomenon that Karzai laments and regards as an indicator of what he refers to as academic tribalism that is still prevalent in the contemporary Anglo-American academy (xi-xii).

Second, the book is written by an academic sociologist with an interest in the rise of authoritarian and populist tendencies in contemporary society. His commentary on Nietzsche's critique of the ideology of progress and of associated theories of social development aims to help the reader to recognize how sociologists have traditionally overlooked the underlying social psychological mechanisms and processes that lead to the spread of self-denying dispositions among ordinary people. Karzai liberally employs concepts and theories drawn from Nietzsche's social philosophy to expose the detrimental effects of progressive politics and liberal ideas that seem innocent at first glance and that we take for granted. Taken together Karzai's reflections on Nietzsche's genealogy of power structures bring to the fore an awareness of the pathological tendencies of modern life. Modern existence testifies to an ever-increasing conformist mediocrity that many choose not to confront head-on. What appears to be needed are more effective tools of critical and creative thinking to speak out and act against humanity's confinement within an ethos of 21st century surveillance capitalism and consumer culture that relentlessly reduces human character to a one-dimensional, quantifiable unit in the service of collective identity. Karzai's Nietzschean insights into the 19th century political landscape in Europe (the rise of German nationalism, communism, socialism, etc.) attempt to shed more light on the roots of these contemporary issues that one should endeavor to overcome. Here is an example of Karzai's effort to demonstrate Nietzsche's relevance to problems faced by contemporary modern society:

Nietzsche's repeated warnings of the rise of modern authoritarianism should be a sober reminder for us all in the twenty-first century: contemporary twenty-first century authoritarianism has its roots in the social and political movements of the nineteenth-century Europe that Nietzsche described. The rapidly growing control of the state over the civic life in the nineteenth century makes for an astounding resemblance with today's current forms of control and surveillance over our entire sociocultural, economic, and political life (129).



Third, while calls for the importance of reflexivity in the discipline of sociology has been commonplace for decades, Karzai's critical engagement with Nietzsche's social and cultural criticism reveals that the sociologist's basic set of beliefs or assumptions should be reflected upon even more seriously now than at any time before. It is this aspect of the book – its emphasis on the value of critical social knowledge and its emancipatory implications – that makes the rest of it especially interesting. One may, at this point, characterize Karzai's overall project as a worthwhile attempt to synthesize Nietzschean reevaluation of all values with a post-Marxist social theory, where the aspiration is to identify and transform the conditions that facilitate or hamper the realization of human agency and dignity in contemporary society.

However, there are several issues that I take with the book, both structural and content related. I hope that the positives of what one may experience through the read far outweigh my complaints – but that judgement I ultimately leave to the reader.

First and foremost, I am a little curious as to the intended target audience of *Nietzsche and Sociology*. Here is what Karzai says, from the end of the introduction of the book: "...it is an attempt to introduce to the discipline of sociology and social theory a thinker whose conceptual tools and social theory for critically examining industrial modernity can no longer be ignored" (xv). And Karzai comes close to clarifying what the level of readership and study the book was intended for only after 70 pages into the book. He suggests that *Nietzsche and Sociology* is an "introductory book on Nietzsche's relevance for sociological thinking" (70). It seems fair then to assume that *Nietzsche and Sociology* exclusively targets professional sociologists and theorists (including perhaps also advanced undergraduate and graduate students of sociology). However, the book's contents are likely to have appeal to many outside sociology. By specifically addressing the readership from sociology, Karzai may unwittingly be excluding or alienating potential readers outside the circle. Here I worry that, despite his disdain for academic tribalism, or for traditional sociology's "unwillingness to step outside of its disciplinary boundaries" (xiii), Karzai appears to be falling prey to the same issue that he seeks to caution readers against. An introductory book on Nietzsche's relevance for sociological thinking deserves to have a broad readership from sociology, political science, philosophy, and beyond. For instance, a student of philosophy does probably not fall squarely in the target audience. But there should be useful things to take away from this book for readers with training primarily in philosophy. Karzai is not clear about what he hopes such readers would take away from his book.

The target audience of Karzai's book are curious readers from sociology who are presumably in need of a brief and accessible introduction to Nietzsche's social philosophy. However, here is a concern I have. Karzai's book assumes extensive knowledge of Nietzsche's writings as well as significant familiarity with the sources that Karzai cites and the bulk of the secondary philosophical literature that he freely draws upon to convince and attract readers' interest in the subject. The issues Karzai raises in his book are complex. Without grappling with Nietzsche's canonical texts on their own first, many of the issues raised in *Nietzsche and Sociology*, I am afraid, may not engage readers from sociology on a deeper level. The issue is that I would not consider *Nietzsche and Sociology* an introductory book on Nietzsche's sociological thinking at all, as it is addressed towards readers with more advanced knowledge of Nietzsche's work.

The book borrows various concepts, theories, and methods from sociology and philosophy, and applies them to examine Nietzsche's sociological thinking. Throughout the book, Karzai employs various ideas and concepts from Nietzsche's philosophy without clearly communicating his understanding of core Nietzschean concepts (such as will to power, master–slave morality, and resentment) to provide a foundation for his analysis. It is disappointing that Karzai devotes no attention to detailing the rationale for the structure of his conceptual framework or the lack thereof. In other words, the reader is somewhat left in the dark as to what conceptual framework Karzai follows. This is, in my view, the book's greatest weakness. The conceptual landscape is messy and confusing, making it difficult (especially for those who are less familiar with Nietzsche's idiosyncratic jargon and philosophical assumptions) to fully grasp Karzai's analysis and conclusions, and see the connections between different parts and chapters within the book.

Karzai claims that Nietzsche was not given full recognition for his sociological ideas and theories, or to be more precise, his ideas that are relevant to sociology. He observes that “Nietzsche is scarcely recognized as a sociologist” (69). And he makes it clear that he does not “attempt to claim Nietzsche as a sociologist in the traditional sense of that word” (xiv). What I find particularly confusing is that on the one hand, Karzai appears reluctant to call Nietzsche a sociologist, instead just seeking to bring forth Nietzsche's sociologically relevant ideas through comparative analyses and evaluation. On the other hand, Karzai speaks of “Nietzsche's sociology of social forces” (88), “Nietzsche's sociology of culture, physiology, and morality” (130), or simply “Nietzsche's sociology” (148). But what kind of a sociology is this? Surely, Nietzsche is not “a moral sociologist” à la Durkheim (116). That much is clear. Nietzsche's sociological inquiry relies on a form of social psychology that examines how cultures either promote or inhibit human development, or how values arise from contingent historical conditions and then develop into complex legal systems and mores. This, in turn, informs our understandings of human character and social order and how we think about, influence, and relate to one another. However, Karzai's discussions do not adequately apprise the reader of what he takes to be the basic features of Nietzsche's sociology. And there is even a further problem. Is Karzai arguing that Nietzsche has a distinct sociology (of X, Y, Z, etc.), or is he merely suggesting the possibility of deriving a “Nietzschean sociology” (110) from *On the Genealogy of Morality* and Nietzsche's other writings? We simply do not know the exact answer. Thus, the issue remains to what extent a Nietzschean sociology exists as such.

The book has, in total, eight chapters. The first five chapters involve Karzai's discussions of the connections between Nietzsche and various prominent sociologists (Foucault, Adorno, Weber, Marx, etc.). Karzai does not sufficiently motivate the reader as to why the discussed sociologists, their arguments and positions matter. Why does a book on Nietzsche's sociological thinking start with a comparative analysis of Nietzsche and Foucault, and why not Nietzsche and Simmel for instance? This is not to say, of course, that it is absolutely arbitrary to compare Nietzsche with Foucault. All I mean to suggest is that Karzai does not explain the motivations behind his inclusions and exclusions of certain thinkers. Furthermore, the connection between different parts of the book is not made entirely evident, which ends up giving the impression that *Nietzsche and Sociology* is not a cohesive book on the subject of Nietzsche's sociological thinking, but rather a collection of stand-alone essays.



I was eager to see, in particular, what the chapter on Nietzsche and Marx had to say given the book's opening epigraph from Max Weber:

One can measure the integrity of a modern scholar, and especially of a modern philosopher, by how he sees his own relationship to Nietzsche and Marx... The world in which we ourselves exist intellectually is largely a world stamped by Marx and Nietzsche (Weber quoted in Baumgarten 1964: 554-5).

I was hoping to discover “the sociological affinity between Nietzsche and Marx” (74). However, the chapter ended up highlighting more so the substantial differences in their conceptions of society, power, and their approaches to reform. In *his The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*, political theorist Bernard Yack argues for the claim that Nietzsche took up the task of achieving dignity for all humanity, and did not occupy himself solely with the fate of a few exceptional individuals (320). And in his own way, Yack claims, Nietzsche wanted, “like Marx, to overthrow the conditions that make men, all men, contemptible” (321). I disagree with Yack on this point but tend to agree with Karzai's account of the differences between Nietzsche and Marx:

...Nietzsche and Marx did diverge on the ways in which a radically different society could be built. They arrived at a [sic] two different conceptions of man and freedom. While Marx believed in the power of the people to change their historical conditions, Nietzsche only considered the possibility of a few exceptional individuals who were free from ‘slave morality,’ and could lead the rest of the society to a much higher, life-affirming grounds [sic] (74).

Karzai's point of comparing Marx's and Nietzsche's ideas is obviously not to merely contrast them and make them seem different. It seems, however, that the differences between the two social thinkers are so extreme as to make the comparison rather pointless. Two further points of critique can be made. Karzai claims that Nietzsche has a materialist conception of history similar to Marx's (91). I doubt that Nietzsche's genealogical project relies on a rigorous historical-materialist methodology. Karzai also claims that, for Nietzsche, “community was where one gave up one's own creative individuality and one's own uniqueness” (85). This is a debatable point in the secondary literature. It seems to me that Nietzsche's views on the value of community are more sophisticated than Karzai's portrayal of them (see Julian Young 2014).

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter is Chapter 5 (titled “The Ascetic Sociologists: The Case of Comte and Durkheim”). This chapter calls attention to certain ascetic tendencies in sociological theories and practices. I think that the ideas in this chapter could be expanded into another book, and maybe they will be.

Karzai's book provides a rich and energetic interpretation of Nietzsche's social philosophy, exploring the continued relevance of Nietzsche's writings in light of contemporary cultural and social issues – even though, as I noted above, it is perhaps a little superficial in some of its comparisons and analyses. In the final analysis, there is much food for thought in Karzai's book. Hence, despite that Karzai's book puts much of the focus on sociologists, it should appeal to anyone who is interested in Nietzsche's sociological insights and perspectives.

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