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Nihilism Beyond Margins: Towards A Reorganization of Forces

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Abstract

Nietzsche diagnosed nihilism as a “European problem” that would unfold into different kinds, such as reactive, negative, and affirmative. In this paper, I intend to look at some current events of our time under the lens of the nihilism diagnosed by Nietzsche and discussed by Vattimo. My aim is to problematize some questions related to such events and sustain an argument that nihilism is no longer a European event but a global one. I intend to look at specifics of migration in our time in Europe that may reveal that the European nihilism alluded by Nietzsche has spread to other continents, particularly in countries that were previously European colonies. Such countries inherited European values that were imposed onto local cultures, causing the eradication of groups, ways of life, languages, and the disappearance of local epistemologies in which the world disclosed itself in certain ways. This caused a violent detachment of local individuals, cultures and values that previously sustained their ways of life. However, since the values that were imposed by Europeans during colonization have lost their meaning, what does the flux of non-European migrants happening in Europe reveal in relation to the current unfolding of nihilism and what possibilities may it bring for the overcoming of these corrosive forces? Adding to this complex scenario, Europe (as well as the whole world) is experiencing significant changes in climate that affect directly our interaction with the immanent world. Europeans are already experiencing some of the climate changes that cause displacement in other areas of the world bringing vulnerabilities to areas that previously experienced more steady and controlled environments. The idea here is to analyse how the confusion that nihilism brings to our time, particularly on the issue of migration and also change in climate, exposes all beings to a kind of vulnerability and, at the same time, if we look carefully, it also could expose strengths of those who have been previous excluded. This, I argue, may lead to a reorganisation of forces.

Keywords: *Nihilism; margins; forces; climate; migrants*

Introduction

Nietzsche diagnosed nihilism in all its forms, in particular the devaluation of the highest values, as a “European problem”. This devaluation, which happened after modernity, would last for around 200 years (WP “Preface,” §2) until its corrosive and life-denying forces could be shifted to a prognosis of a more robust and life affirming value-based society. However, today, over 100 years since Nietzsche’s diagnosis, it is worth asking where we find ourselves in the prognosis forecasted by him.

We are living in very complex and challenging times in which the last few years we have experienced some events that may shape the lives of the generations to come. These events affect not only Europe, or the “West”, but also resonate with and affect the whole of our planet. Some of these events are the result of nationalisms/populisms which are moved

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by life-denying dualistic forces, promoting the separation and segregation of differences (us/not us).

Andrea Rehberg (2022, p.125) defines populism as “a collective term for the anti-pluralistic, racist, xenophobic, often authoritarian and repressive regimes of the extreme right”. She clarifies the forces that move such kind of populism: “populist ideologies are rigidly dualistic, espousing the idea that society is composed of two essentially homogeneous and antagonistic groups” (p.126). Hence, Rehberg relates this current rise in populism with resentment and reactive nihilism when she says, “populism can be understood as the most recent form of humanity’s gradual slide into reactivity and nihilism, whose beginnings and key characteristics Nietzsche shows in the *Genealogy*” (p.134). Thus, the rise in populism means a direct unfolding of the reactive nihilism diagnosed by Nietzsche.

Another significant, more recent event, the change in climate, is occurring worldwide. This is bringing challenges and uncertainty. Western countries, which were used to having a more stable and predictable climate, are now experiencing regular flooding, unusual higher temperatures and seeing their own population being displaced, albeit sometimes temporarily, when these extreme natural events happen. Adding to that, the crisis brought by mass migration/refugees, particularly in Europe, and the way the issue is being dealt with by governments, is fuelling populism and division. Considering the above scenario, how can the work of Nietzsche shed some light on how to navigate the challenges brought by such complexities?

In this paper, I intend to look at some current events of our time under the lens of the nihilism diagnosed by Nietzsche and discussed by Vattimo. My aim is to problematize some questions related to the events mentioned and sustain an argument that nihilism is no longer a European but a global event. I intend to look at specifics of migration in Europe that may reveal that the European nihilism alluded to by Nietzsche has spread to other continents, particularly to countries that were previously European colonies. Such countries inherited European values that were forced onto local cultures causing the eradication of groups, ways of life, languages, and the disappearing of local epistemologies in which the world disclosed itself in certain ways. This caused a violent detachment of local individuals and cultures from the world, diminishing the values that previously sustained their ways of life. However, since the values that were imposed by Europeans during colonization have lost meaning, and Europeans themselves are also being affected by changes in climate that are impacting on their sense of stability, bringing a feeling of vulnerability, what does the flux of migration happening in Europe reveal in the encounters of Europeans and non-Europeans in relation to the current unfolding of nihilism? What possibilities may it bring for the overcoming of these corrosive forces?

Nihilism, the human condition and the West’s response to the question of existence

There is a kind of nihilism that is intrinsic to the human condition. Human beings are aware of their own mortality. That certainty gives the sense of needing to justify their existence and the suffering that life brings. This can lead to pessimism and to questioning whether life is worth living. Nietzsche states (WP “European Nihilism” § 9) “pessimism (is) a preliminary form of nihilism”.



This form of nihilism I am calling here the “original nihilism” and I am using the term in the way described by Toby Smith (2006, p. 18) ‘original nihilism - the idea that, as beings who know we are going to die, and who are self-conscious about their suffering, we are intrinsically prey to nihilism’.

In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explains, through the wisdom of Silenus, the meaning of this original nihilism (BT “The Birth of Tragedy”, § 3):

“King Midas had long hunted wise Silenus and when he had finally fallen into his clutches, the king asked him what the best and most desirable thing of all for mankind was. The daemon stood silent, stiff and motionless, until at last, forced by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and spoke these words ‘Miserable, ephemeral race, best of all things is something entirely outside your grasp: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best-best thing for you – is to die soon’.

Different societies can give different responses on how to deal with the pessimism that the original nihilism brings. This response could be a non-nihilistic, life-affirming one where humankind would embrace immanence with its complexity which would include its most painful aspects. By immanence, I am using the definition provided by Andrea Rehberg (2022, p.139) “immanence is not a thing, entity, substance or ground, but should be understood as a movement, an economy, a ceaseless doing and being”. This immanence here, is also related to what is “worldly” including fauna, flora, geographies, climate, temperatures, smells, food etc.

Nietzsche saw a non-nihilist, life-affirming response to the original nihilism, in the values of the culture of the pre-Socratic Greeks. For him, the Ancient Greeks could make a holistic interpretation of life without rejecting their most obscure aspects, promoting, though, the unity between thought, life and action. Moreover, they were able to integrate antagonistic forces without marginalizing or overpowering them. It was exactly this integration of multiple forces that made the *Tragedy* a life-affirming event. However, as discusses Nietzsche, this ability has been lost in the post-platonic society due to the absence, exclusion and marginalization of Dionysian elements and the fact that privilege was given only to the abstract, fixed and metaphysical aspects of the existence at the expense of the denial of the immanent world.

Hence, Nietzsche realised that the responses the West gave for the original nihilism, in the post-Platonic society, were life-denying as they were based on dualistic views and metaphysical values. Such values are identified as negative nihilism as they deny the value of life itself, by denying the bodily and immanent aspects of the world. As explained by Gilles Deleuze (2006, p.147)

“nihil in 'nihilism' means negation as a quality of the will to power ... in its primary and basic sense, nihilism signifies the value of nil taken on by life, the fiction of higher values which give it this value and the will to nothingness which is expressed in these higher values”.

The most known form of nihilism on Nietzsche’s ideas is the reactive nihilism, or the nihilism that was revealed after modernity when the life-denying aspects of the grand narratives of the post-Platonic European society lost their meaning and can be epitomized in ‘What does nihilism mean? The highest values devalued themselves. The aim is lacking;

“why” finds no answer’ (WP, §2). In this reactive form of nihilism, the grand narratives lose their meanings. However, they continue to exist in more decayed forms as explained by Deleuze (2016, p.148) ‘The supersensible world and higher values are reacted against, their existence is denied, they are refused all validity. . . only life remains, but it is still a depreciated life’.

Nietzsche has foreseen that different forms of nihilism, such as passive, active, among others, would be part to the unfolding of the nihilism since the death of God, until a robust and life-affirming value society could emerge. However, Nietzsche treats nihilism as a European event and issues of colonization and the imposition of European values upon other cultures were not part of his discussion, nor other events such as mass migration and changes in climate. Such events are part of the continuum of the unfolding of nihilism in our complex time and it is necessary to investigate if those events may shed some light on Nietzsche’s prognosis.

Nihilism beyond Europe and the voice of the excluded

Nihilism is still developing, and it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about it. We can and we must, however, try to understand at what point it stands, in what way it concerns us, and what choices and attitudes are that it asks us to decide upon

(Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, p.19)

Vattimo self-considered a post-modernist thinker. He made an original claim on nihilism through his concept of ‘Weak Thought’ (*Pensiero Debole*). This concept was first revealed in 1983 and in the last 4 decades Vattimo advanced and developed the meaning of Weak Thought in conversation with other philosophers and by interpreting events of our time. Peter Carraveta (2010, p.81) signalled an important ‘turn’ in Vattimo’s thought from Hermeneutics to a secular Christianity. He saw this happening when Vattimo released his book *Belief* in 1996 which for him symbolised a new beginning where Vattimo went from a postmodern thinking to a premodern. My intention here is not to explore this ‘turn’ in Vattimo’s thought but to focus on the dialogue with the ‘post-pre-Christian’ ideas related to the discussion of nihilism and the voice of the excluded.

The concept of “weak thought” or, as Vattimo called it, “optimistic nihilism”, is related to the postmodern condition. The word ‘weak’ can cause a negative connotation of what Vattimo wants to express. Vattimo’s conception of ‘weak’ is opposite to ‘strong’ but not in the sense of an amount of energy, but in the sense of unity/plurality. Hence weak for him implies considering the multiple, a polyphony in which multiple voices occupy the space which in modernity was occupied by the unilinear history. In that sense “strong” means “mono”, or any attempt to impose just a single or totalitarian category. Vattimo argues that postmodernity brings about the dissolution of the metaphysics and the idea of one fixed truth, therefore freeing the voices of individuals and groups previously excluded.

The distinction between modernity and post modernity in Vattimo’s thought is very important to understand his concept of weak thought, in particular how he conceives hermeneutics in relation to weak thought. As argued by Matthew Harris (2012, p. 32) “Vattimo is a philosopher of hermeneutics (interpretation) but situates it historically in the later modernity rather than as a meta-theory of interpretation”. In that sense, in his analysis, modern relates to rationalism which is also foundationalism and the postmodern



to hermeneutics. Vattimo affirms that “hermeneutics is the thought of accomplished nihilism” therefore the aim, according to him, would be to reconstruct rationality by a polyphony of interpretations and at the same time prevent the growth of an aggressive and destructive form of nihilism.

The idea here is not to agree or disagree with Vattimo, on the way he understood hermeneutics as “accomplished nihilism” or on his idea of a “reconstructed rationality” as that is not the scope of this work. My focus here is to investigate the contributions some of his interpretations on nihilism may bring to the understanding of current issues. Thus, Vattimo has an important contribution to the understanding of nihilism in our time when he expands the discussion from nihilism being a European event to include the polyphony of the voices of the ex-colonies. These voices were initially suppressed by what he called the unilinear history, or the history told considering only the European voice. This means that what was considered as ‘truth’ in this encounter was voiced by Europeans and their narratives. However, such ‘grand’ narratives, at the point of colonization, had already started their process of dissolution, losing their meaning from modernity in Europe.

Despite this, the European narratives that were already losing their ‘strength’ were inflicted upon the colonised, who perhaps were unaware that, in Europe, ‘God was dead’. Thus, colonization meant also the imposition of moribund values upon the new colonies. This process also created a great timing imbalance as they were imposed as fresh and ‘alive’ upon the colonies when they were already ‘dying’ in Europe. The old ‘dying God’ was trying to resuscitate in new shores.

This encounter of Europeans and non-Europeans during the colonization symbolized a violence toward local ways of life and knowledge, as the latter had to detach themselves from the values that held their communities together in favour of the belief in a metaphysical and moribund value base. In my view, such groups have been subjected to a kind of almost simultaneous double infliction of nihilism. By double nihilism, I mean first by the non-Europeans having to deny their local ways of life and possible life affirming practices in order to implement European values, as the way to fill the vacuum (original nihilism) left by the detachment and denial of their own local values. The second face of this double nihilism is that the Indigenous had to embrace and forge meaning on to life-denying Western metaphysical values (the values of the colonisers). Their detachment from social practices and relations to the immanent world along with the imposed meaning of metaphysical values in order to fill the void of the original nihilism happened through extreme violence. This may have caused the destabilization of many cultures and a decrease in their power, as Nietzsche discussed in WP “Book III” § 480 “in order for a particular species to maintain and increase its power, its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behaviour on it”. Hence, the consistency between values based on a people’s reality and their increase of power would be vital for their growth and expansion, however this sense of reality and immanence was substituted by the imposition of an abstract and metaphysical understanding of the world by colonisers that eroded local cultures and practices and modes of life.

Nowadays, as the ‘death of God’ has also affected ex-colonies in our globalised world, it can be very problematic for ex-colonies to deal with issues such as the rise of nationalism and a certain kind of nostalgia for the past that has been emerging in the last few years.

Despite various attempts to resist and fight against this domination, what is at stake here is that the responses that these cultures gave in regards to the original nihilism - the one previously mentioned which is intrinsic to our human condition - were sidelined. The European response to this original nihilism was imposed upon colonies. Despite the efforts made by natives of ex-colonies and their descendants to resist and maintain local values, these values were gradually abandoned and sidelined. As a result, today, what many people from ex-colonies may still consider to be a shared ‘common past’ are the decayed European values imposed upon them, as local life-affirming practices and models of these cultures were thrown into oblivion. This was explained by Michael McNeal (2022, p.325) “globalisation alienates the exemplars of the cultures its hijacks from them and their henceforth simulated cultures. It also unmoors the vast majority from the meanings that formerly anchored them to their reality, casting them adrift in a fog of unedifying relativism and nihilism”.

Nietzsche clarified what is essential for a culture is “above all else, a unity of artistic style that manifests itself throughout all the vital self-expressions of a people” (UM, David Strauss, 2003, p.5). It may necessitate a great deal of suspension of the decayed European narratives, along with individual and collective immanent imagination, to provoke a new reattuning to the immanent world that would help to overcome the life-denying values and to build new life-affirming ones. However, it is necessary to identify how the aspects of the nihilism discussed above and their current repercussions, particularly in the rise of nationalisms, the increase in immigration and changes in climate, could lead to possibilities of life-affirming encounters.

Immigration in a time of massive changes in climate: towards a reorganisation of forces

“Remain faithful to the earth” (Z I, Prologue, 3).

The increase of migration in Europe has risen in the last few decades and changed particularly after WWII². However, this is not necessarily a new phenomenon as “Europe has been a crossroads of human mobility since ancient times”. This increase in migration is caused by factors including movements of refugees, people moving from and to ex-colonies, regional working agreements and the need for high-skilled workers, EU freedom of movement, geopolitical unrest and displacements due to climate change. The Covid 19 pandemic brought some temporary changes to the influx of migrants in Europe. Local lockdowns and travel restrictions introduced to prevent the spreading of the virus were factors that contributed to a temporary slowdown of the movement of people.

The Migration Data Portal has published the most recent dynamics in migration in Europe. They have concluded that migration has become much more diverse in terms of origins of migrants, both globally and in Europe, where most migration is intra-continental.

² For more detailed information, please look at the Migration Data Portal, available at <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/europe>, UN Migration Report 2019 https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/InternationalMigration2019_Report.pdf, The UN Refugee Agency <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>, The European Union Euro barometer <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2253>, The Pew Research Centre <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/12/10/many-worldwide-oppose-more-migration-both-into-and-out-of-their-countries/> and UN IOM Migration <https://publications.iom.int/books/2019-return-and-reintegration-key-highlights>.



Additionally, the number of refugees is on the rise and over 160,000 migrant workers who were found to be irregularly in the EU have returned annually to their countries of origin and 28,256 migrants were assisted to return from the EEA to their countries of origin in 2019. However, Europe is also trying to attract highly skilled immigrants and has offered several initiatives to employ them. This is due to a global shortage of talent that has been also felt in Europe. Overall, in the West there has been an intensified concern in relation to the political and social effects of migration.

This increase in immigration has led to a rise in nationalisms and the idea of the preservation of a supposed cultural identity. Andrea Rehberg (2022, p.128) argues that there is no such a thing as a national cultural homogeneity. Thus, “even before any influx of migrants – who are themselves a very diverse group – every culture is already differentiated according to the political, psycho-social and ethnic diversity of its population”. She argues that immigration brings “a series of complex encounters between heterogeneous multiple micro-identities” (ibid). Thus, the dualistic understanding between us/not us, natives and foreigners is only “a symptom of a nostalgic longing for a simpler world, in which personal and political identity felt more like a full subjectivity, in contrast to today’s split, fragmented, pluralist subjectivities” (idem).

Hence, the complexity of the encounters happening because of migration is not being properly considered. Migrants may experience a diversity of sensorial and immanent experiences that can lead to an expansion of forces. This can be related to eating different kinds of food and their variety of tastes. They may also experience different climates, seasons that can be completely different from those in Europe, monsoons and exotic fauna and flora, among other immanent aspects. When moving to a different country, they can widen their sensorial experiences by navigating different climates, geographies and elements of the immanent world and this can bring the possibility of forces in expansion to become of noble character. Rehberg (2022, p. 136), also quoting EH “Why I am so Clever”, §. 8 to 10”, explains that in terms of Nietzschean forces, being they slavishness or nobility, will dominate any given phenomena

“is a question of innumerable, infinitely subtle, almost imperceptible interacting factors, such as diet, locale, climate, the relative humidity of the environment, the quality of the air and the direction of the wind – a dynamic of factors almost too subtle for our organs of perception and consciousness”.

Hence, these newly created and or/amplification of forces, which I call an ‘excess of forces’ in migrants, may have the potential to expand and to develop, if appropriate conditions are available. However, such widening forces present in migrants are often disregarded when they are framed by the reactive lenses that separate people in dualistic categories of us/not us.

Nihilism in Europe in times of change in climate

“a great *physiological* process is taking place, the slow emergence of an essentially supra-national and nomadic type of man which, physiologically speaking, possesses as its typical distinction a maximum of the art and power of adaptation” (BGE § 242, p.172/3).

Climate is changing around the world, and most European governments have already recognised the link between climate change and migration. Severe weather conditions are causing waves of people to be displaced from their lands³. However, these changes in weather are also affecting people within Europe, including recurrent fires⁴, flash floods⁵, periods of drought, and extended periods of hot and cold weather. In the UK, the Climate Change Committee⁶ report released in March 2023 claims that “Last year’s record-breaking temperatures brought unprecedented heat-related deaths, wildfire incidents and significant infrastructure disruption”.

These factors are affecting a great part of the European population, including those who are not migrants and perhaps have never left their land. Although many people deny the effect of human activity in the depletion of the planet, those who are nostalgic for the unilinear history and the old, devalued values are more often supportive of such life-denying narratives. Despite the fact that some are still disputing the reasons behind changes in climate, they are and will be affected by its consequences, such as temporary displacement from areas in which they have lived for generations, or changes that are forcing locals to learn how to readapt to these changes in climate. This experience may bring some opportunities for the body to accommodate different modalities of temperature, air density, levels of rain, changes in diet, cultivation of food that were not common to certain areas. This may result in new openings for the expansion of the senses and perhaps an opening for new disclosures of the world and the acknowledgement of new aspects of the immanent world that might be unknown to many.

It is interesting to see how a re-arrangement and expansion of forces developed by migrants in the process of migration can equip them to accommodate the changes in climate that is happening in the immanent world. On the other hand, it would be also interesting see how to the exposition to these new changes in climates will unfold for native Europeans, if they may result in ways of “translating human beings back to nature” (BGE, §230).

Will Europeans and migrant non-Europeans living in Europe be able to suspend the effects of the decayed nihilistic values and change the direction of their forces? Are these forces going to become passive or active forces? (WP “Book III”, § 657). The answer to this question is beyond what I am proposing here. However, we must be open to this complexity and plurality to understand if there are (any) opportunities to bridge the gap in the separation provoked by dualistic views and reductionist views of otherness. Indeed, it is necessary to move towards a reorganisation of the forces that can take into consideration the plurality of forces in their micro realisations, in immanence, considering a general economy of the whole.

³ See the Future of Climate Migration from the European Parliament [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATA\(2022\)729334_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATA(2022)729334_EN.pdf)

⁴ See information from the European Commission on Climate Change and Wildfires https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-09/09_pesetaiv_wildfires_sc_august2020_en.pdf

⁵ See Copernicus Europe’s eyes on earth for more information <https://climate.copernicus.eu/esotc/2021/flooding-july>

⁶ For more detailed information please see: <https://www.theccc.org.uk/2023/03/29/climate-change-has-arrived-yet-the-country-is-still-strikingly-unprepared/>



Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed some of Nietzsche's ideas, particularly relating to the unfolding of nihilism considering the current events happening in the West. Special attention was given to the consideration of the voices of the excluded, particularly of those from ex-colonies and other ways of life that were disregarded by the unilinear narrative as posed by Vattimo. The events in our time bring to the scene the repercussions of the pluralities of voices, ways of life, modes of world disclosure and multiplicity brought by immigration. This happens in parallel to the rise of life-denying nostalgia for the unilinear history that characterizes some of the complexity of forces at play in the current unfolding of the nihilism. This scenario brings us massive challenges in how to bridge the gap between the separation brought by the us/not us endorsed by nationalists, and the effect this has on the acknowledgment of the multiplicity and plurality that the world is.

Adding to this yet complex scenario, we are experiencing worldwide changes in climate that have the possibility to reshape our relationship with the earth and the immanent world. In this sense, these changes affect the whole world and migration. Many people (including Europeans) are or will be displaced from their lands due to extreme climate conditions. This will see Europeans, who were used to more controlled and steady seasons, experiencing related climate conditions to people from non-Western countries who, in many cases, have had to flee such conditions.

Europeans may have the possibility to expand forces when struggling with changes in climate, their own need to temporarily move due to adverse weather conditions, and their need to accommodate such changes and the unpredictability that the future of climate holds. This may be an opportunity for forces to change their direction from a life-preserving mode to a life-affirming one. A mutual educative process can happen when migrants have their excess and expansion of forces recognised. Whether those forces become active or reactive is unknown, but Rehberg (2022, p.139) gives us some food for thought when discussing about forces and immanence.

“Different kinds of forces can be understood in relation to and by their relation to it: namely, whether they resist it (reactively) or whether are open to, drawn to, sustained by it (activity). Everything and everyone are already encompassed in it, but that does not mean that everything and everyone is always equally open to it. The hostility certain phenomena and life-forms display towards otherness is always of a piece with their resistance to immanence or the impersonal happening of will to power”.

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