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Editors' Foreword: Nietzsche and Democracy

The Editorial Team¹

“As another American presidential election looms large over 2024, it seems appropriate to reflect on what Nietzsche has to say about democracy, both as a political form of organization, narrowly construed, and its broader cultural implications.” Thus began the call for papers for the present issue of *The Agonist*. With the recent American presidential election now come and gone, we can only look back on the months leading up to it and its aftermath. No doubt Nietzsche’s scathing sentiments on democracy will seem prescient in light of the electoral victories of our populist party. Was it not the *Pöbel* after all that lay at the root of Nietzsche’s suspicions of a government of, by and for the ‘people’? It is no small irony that such mistrust of democratic institutions has since seeped into the bedrock of those very same institutions themselves, as our newly elected president’s success makes patently clear: what began as an earnest cry from a populace that would not be deplored by its political elites, and what many wrongly believed had been thwarted for good by a failed mob uprising on our nation’s Capitol, has in fact led to the decisive reelection of our country’s populist idol. Some would argue that there is no better proof that we are living in a nihilistic age, if by nihilism we take Nietzsche’s definition to heart: “what is the meaning of nihilism? – *that the highest values devalue themselves*” (NL 1887, 9[35]) – in this case, our country’s long-held ‘democratic values,’ rooted as they are in the ‘peaceful transition of power’ following a fair election.

Such arguments as these, however, fail to live up to the historical philosophy that Nietzsche envisioned. Not only would a practice of philosophy grounded in history avoid self-fulfilling prophecies both progressive and regressive, but it would also take seriously the unexpected turns of history, which have to be dealt with one way or another – often to the chagrin of our elected officials. “It is no use: we *have to* go forwards, and I mean *step by step further into decadence* (– this is *my* definition of modern ‘progress’...). You can *inhibit* this development and even dam up the degeneration through inhibition, gather it together, make it more violent and *sudden*: but that is all you can do” (TI “Skirmishes” §43).² Progressives will be taken aback by these words of Nietzsche’s spoken “*in the conservative’s ear*,” as though a step *backwards* were an impossibility. Don’t our own country’s politicians consistently prove otherwise? In true historical-philosophical fashion, we really ought to ask whether we are in fact going backwards, and not rather entering a new stage of *décadence* in our current political climate. Such is the historical process at any rate, which is by no means set in advance, but unfolds as it were in often unpredictably tragic ways. Whatever Nietzsche’s assessment of democracy, his understanding of history as an agonistic play of forces precludes any easy answers to our current political dilemmas.

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² Norman, Judith, translator. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. By Friedrich Nietzsche, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 217.

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It is in this spirit that the essays of the present issue are delivered, which do not take Nietzsche's remarks on democracy at face value, but critically reassess them in productive ways. In this way, our authors uncover the political tenor of Nietzsche's texts, which while overtly antidemocratic may yet prove to be fruitful for future democratic developments. This should not be surprising. After all, the sheer unpredictability and openness of historical outcomes implies a degree of freedom already, without which history would be written in advance. And this degree of freedom, whether real or illusory, already forms the foundation of our very modern democratic ideals, while Nietzsche's teachings on power and freedom fall on deaf ears.

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