

The Swan Song of French Nietzscheanism

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By [Richard Wolin](#) 07/19/2018

This piece is the first in a series of responses to the controversy surrounding Avital Ronell, University Professor in the Humanities at New York University, and the letter signed by nearly 50 leading intellectuals defending her against a student's accusation of sexual harassment.

Academe's traditional summer calm has been upended by a frisson of scandal that has radiated outward from the otherwise staid corridors of New York University. The main outlines of this *tempête* are by now well known: an accomplished Professor of German and Comparative Literature, Avital Ronell, has been accused by one of her graduate students of a Title IX violation. University authorities have responded to the allegations with the utmost seriousness. According to one report, Ronell's standing at NYU may even be in jeopardy.

Under normal circumstances, the preceding details would provide sufficient cause for dismay and alarm, especially in light of the fact that the case in question involves a rare instance of "gender reversal" — the accuser is a man, and the accused, a woman — thus turning the #MeToo movement inside out, as it were.

However, an additional complication emerged when it came to light that a long list of star professors — in essence, a Who's Who of the academic and cultural left — had submitted a petition in Ronell's defense. What rankled many about the petition was its sheer presumption: it argued for Ronell's exoneration, not on the merits of the case, concerning which very few details have been made public, but on the basis of her reputation. It was as though the petitioners were claiming that someone of Ronell's stature and prowess was a priori above reproach. Thereby, the signers insinuated that members of the elite academic "theory club" should not be subject to the same standards as mere mortals.

One would have thought that such arguments, predicated on rank and privilege, would have died with the ancien régime. Apparently not. The irony is that, whereas many of the signatories

typically regard themselves as champions of the oppressed, when it suits their purposes, they have few qualms about invoking the prerogatives of caste-privilege.

In lieu of evidence and persuasive argumentation, the missive concludes with a series of veiled threats: retaliatory measures likely to ensue should the investigation culminate in a verdict unfavorable to the standpoint endorsed by the petitioners: “If [Ronell] were to be terminated or relieved of her duties, the injustice would be widely recognized and opposed. The ensuing loss for the humanities, for New York University, and for intellectual life during these times would be no less than enormous and would rightly invite widespread and intense public scrutiny.”

At this point, several interviewees have gone on record attesting to the exceptionally intense emotional bond that Ronell cultivated with students. One prominent humanities professor who knew Ronell described her approach as follows: “The talk was always about very non-standard relationships, but not of a sexual hue or inappropriate contexts. I’m talking about phoning at very strange times of day, asking for unusual things and creating some sort of dependency relationship.” [*Haaretz*, June 29, 2018]

In late June, Slavoj Žižek, who was one of the original signatories of the letter, weighed in on the controversy. In Žižek’s eyes, Ronell is a latter-day Hester Prynne who is being persecuted owing to the “disturbing element [in] her unique persona”: that is, for her insistence on disrupting “the Politically Correct mixture of polite coldness and fake compassion” that, according to Žižek, in contemporary academe remains the unspoken behavioral standard. Thus conduct that others have criticized for encouraging “non-standard relationships” between faculty and students, Žižek praises for its *transgressive* attributes and qualities. In Žižek’s view, the narrowminded guardians of academic convention “were just waiting (or rather actively searching) for some slip to catch her [Ronell].”

In the remarks that follow, I do not presume to pass judgment on the murky circumstances enveloping Ronell’s case. Instead, I wish to analyze the unstated philosophical presuppositions that, in my view, lie at the heart of this disturbing episode. As I perceive it, the main issue concerns an approach to pedagogy for which, as it has been alleged, “very non-standard relationships” are viewed as desirable. Surprisingly, to date, no such analysis or interpretation has been forthcoming. Attention to this aspect of the controversy might also help to account for the hubris that, in the eyes of many observers, suffused the petition that was submitted to NYU administrators by Ronell’s high-flying academic defenders.

As a type of shorthand, I shall denominate the mindset or paradigm at issue, “French Nietzscheanism.” It is no secret that the philosophical eminences that the French Theory vogue was nurtured by were Nietzsche and Heidegger. In his “Final Interview” (June 1984), Foucault underlined the indispensability of these two thinkers for his own intellectual trajectory, observing: “My entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger. I nevertheless recognize that Nietzsche outweighed him. ... These are the two fundamental experiences I have had. ... These are ... the two authors I have read the most.” (Foucault, “Final Interview,” *Raritan* 1/5, 1985).

Following World War II, Heidegger, who was banned from teaching owing to his vociferous support for Nazi policies, made a concerted effort to cultivate the allegiance of influential French intellectuals, since, at the time, his *Heimat* in the southwestern province of Baden, Germany was occupied by French troops. (In 1945, he invited French philosophical luminary, Jean-Paul Sartre, to accompany him on a Black Forest ski retreat. Sartre politely declined.)

One of the outstanding ironies in the recent history of the transnational migration of ideas is that although Nazi Germany lost the Second World War on the battlefield, it handily won the battle of ideas that, following the war, played out in the cafés, bookstores, lecture halls of the Latin Quarter in Paris. With the fall of France in 1940, the political ideals of French Republicanism endured a series of ignominious drubbings — a sequence that culminated in the French army's humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and, eight years later, the loss of French Algeria. Deprived of a usable political past, French intellectuals were bereft of a moral compass; a mood of morose self-abasement gained the upper hand. In this way, the stage was set for the triumph of French Nietzscheanism. Among *habitués* of the Rive Gauche, Nietzsche's thoroughgoing *Kulturpessimismus* — his proto-Spenglerian conviction that Western civilization was on an irreversible, fast-track to perdition and damnation — coalesced with the reigning mood of hopelessness: the sense that all available options for cultural regeneration had been exhausted.

Endemic to this Nietzschean epistemological standpoint was an acute and pervasive *value-cynicism*: the conviction that the totality of Western moral and philosophical ideals was inherently nihilistic. It was in this spirit that French Nietzscheans denounced the philosophical quest for “truth” as illegitimate and misguided. Ultimately, truth merely served as a mask or veneer for “interests.” Hence, when all was said and done, it merely camouflaged and dissembled underlying power-relations. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), a staunch anti-Nietzschean and mentor to France's current president, Emmanuel Macron, aptly characterized the Nietzschean approach as a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

Foucault eloquently gave voice to the epistemological cynicism characteristic of French Nietzscheanism when, in a 1976 interview, he observed that:

Truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, or the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. *Truth is a thing of this world*: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics truth — that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish between true and false statements... the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who were charged with saying what counts is true. [“Truth and Power,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 3, “Power,” p. 131]

In other words: all truth is merely functional. There is nothing “true” about truth, except for the role it plays in consolidating and maintaining existing power relations. According to this perspective, the age-old conceit concerning the *emancipatory power of truth*, the bromide that “truth will set you free,” is a monumental instance of bad faith and deceit. On the contrary, by naively subscribing to received notions of truth, we enmesh ourselves all the more thoroughly in the maw of existing power relations.

However, one of the problems with this “functional” definition of truth is that it undermines itself. It bespeaks a standpoint that can only be maintained at the price of self-contradiction. If all truth-related discourses merely express interests and power-relations, then — *tu quoque!* — the same deficiencies haunt the perspective of French Nietzscheanism. In the end, we would be foolish to heed its declarations and prescriptions, since it, too, is a merely an efflux or exemplar of — to employ another Foucauldian trope — “power-knowledge.”

Moreover, this ultra-cynical interpretation of truth is contradicted by our common intuitions about the workings of ordinary language. As a rule, we proceed according to the supposition that our interlocutors are sincere, and that everyday language, whatever its shortcomings, is capable of accurately representing the circumstances we seek to describe. Understood in these terms, the narrowly instrumental or strategic view of language embraced by French Nietzscheanism stands as a counterfactual instance: a deviation from the presuppositions of everyday linguistic practice.

French Nietzscheanism’s dubious epistemological claims, its pervasive cynicism about truth and communication, are the cornerstone of French Theory. In what ways might these factors have played a role in the fraught Title IX debate that has roiled the NYU campus? And how might they have contributed to the intellectual arrogance that characterized the controversial petition that was intended to buttress Ronell’s case, but whose intentions seem to have egregiously backfired?

French Nietzscheanism alleges that inherited institutional norms are manifestations of power. On these grounds, in a Foucauldian spirit, it equates “norms” with practices of “normalization.” This supposition implies that, as critical intellectuals, *it is our duty to disrupt and overturn these norms*, wherever they might be found. Among the adepts and initiates of French Theory, such acts of disruption have assumed the status of new moral imperative. By engaging in such acts, the proponents of French Theory seek to unsettle and displace the normalizing constraints of existing power relations, thereby reinventing themselves as Nietzschean “immoralists.” They seek to transcend the repressive strictures of the “civilizing process” (N. Elias), thus honoring Nietzsche’s admonition that we conduct ourselves in a manner that is “beyond good and evil.”

One thing that is troubling about this mindset or approach is that it sanctions a dichotomy between craven “rule-followers” and proto-Nietzschean “rule-violators”: that is, between Nietzscheans and non-Nietzscheans. And therein lies the potential for considerable intellectual mischief. On the one hand, French Nietzscheanism belittles those who play by the rules as *conformists*, as the enforcers of “normalization.” On the other hand, it overvalues transgressive behavior, which, in keeping with Nietzsche’s summons to a “transvaluation of all values,” it restyles as a type of new ethical absolute.

Yet, at this point, an additional problem emerges, insofar as French Nietzscheanism’s abhorrence of “norms” and “normativity” risks devolving into a series of arbitrary and gratuitous transgressions. French Theory’s constitutional aversion to norms means that it disdains the distinction between *justifiable* norms and *unjustifiable* norms: between norms that are democratically legitimate as opposed to norms that are oppressive, insofar as they underlie and perpetuate relations of domination. This blind spot or incapacity on French Nietzscheanism’s

part has proved insuperable, since it regards all attempts to “ground” or “re-center” norm-displacing, transgressive behavior as part and parcel of the discourse of “normalization” it seeks to escape.

When all is said and done, such a priori cynicism vis-à-vis norms is unsustainable. After all, it is hardly the case that, as Foucault’s critique of the “disciplinary society” suggests, all norms are “normalizing,” hence, repressive. Rousseau sought to address this problem in *The Social Contract* (1768), arguing that norms that are democratically promulgated qualify as expressions of freedom. Thereby, he made an essential contribution to the modern discourse of political self-determination. According to this paradigm, the criterion for determining whether or not a norm is legitimate has to do with whether it has been formulated in a procedurally fair manner.

Following Rousseau’s lead, during the 1990s a contingent of politically astute French intellectuals sought to raise the alarm concerning the limitations of French Nietzscheanism. Their main concern was that French Nietzscheanism, no matter how it was interpreted and viewed, was incompatible with the democratic aspirations of French Republicanism. Given the authoritarian threats to liberal democracy that have recently proliferated throughout our contemporary world — coalition governments involving far-right parties jeopardizing rule of law in Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Italy; closer to home, in a manner reminiscent of the darkest days of McCarthyism, Donald Trump has sought to besmirch the reputation of citizens who seek to uphold constitutionalism and the separation of powers — their objections and reservations seem especially timely.

One of their main concerns pertained to Nietzscheanism’s corrosive influence on postwar moral thought. They held that, by seeking to “naturalize” morality under Darwin’s influence — by attempting to carve out an approach to moral questions that was “beyond good and evil” — Nietzsche had consigned morality, along with the belief in God and the afterlife, to the realm of illusion. According to Nietzsche, like religion, morality provided consolation for the weak by masking their impotence. Conversely, for superior natures, the belief in morality was detrimental, insofar as it impeded their natural right to untrammelled self-assertion.

To summarize: the dilemma of Nietzscheanism as applied to the moral sphere is that once morality has been so thoroughly discredited and delegitimated, all that remains is the “will to power” or “the right of the strongest.” Hence, the profound corollaries between Nietzsche’s critique of morality and political authoritarianism. Should it come as a surprise that, in 1943, for Mussolini’s 60th birthday, Hitler gifted his fellow dictator an edition of Nietzsche’s collected works?

The turning point in the French debate over Nietzsche’s legacy occurred with the publication of the anthology, *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans* (English language translation: University of Chicago Press, 1997). By probing the antidemocratic thrust of Nietzsche’s doctrines, it was as though the contributors had violated an unspoken taboo. This was especially true in the case of the contributions that addressed the relationship between Nietzsche’s thought and the heritage of European fascism. Here, the focus was less on the way that individual fascists sought to bend Nietzsche’s standpoint to their purposes, than on the more general question of Nietzsche’s persistent defense of reactionary and authoritarian political views. (Similar concerns have been

raised in Zeev Sternhell's important book, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, which was published by Yale University Press in 2010.)

In his essay on "Nietzsche's Reactionary Rhetoric," the political scientist Pierre-André Taguieff underlined the discursive affinities between Nietzsche's thought and the "integral nationalism" that was promoted by Action Française founder, Charles Maurras (1868-1952). A vociferous anti-Dreyfusard, Maurras advocated the abolition of the Third Republic and a return to monarchy. In 1940, he welcomed France's defeat at the hands of the German Wehrmacht as a "divine surprise." During the 1980s, Maurras's slogan, "La politique d'abord" (Politics Comes First!), was adopted by National Front founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen. (That Maurras' legacy of national chauvinism and political intolerance continues to weigh heavily on the French national psyche was illustrated by the controversy that arose last January when, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Maurras' birth, his name inexplicably appeared in the official registry of National Commemorations.) [See New York Times article, "France Rethinks Honor for Charles Maurras, Condemned as Anti-Semite," January 28, 2018]

In "The Brute, the Sophist, and the Aesthete," the philosopher André Comte-Sponville raised a parallel set of concerns. After outlining the factors that separate Nietzsche from interwar European fascism, Comte-Sponville felt compelled to add that, "Nietzsche belongs nevertheless to the same spiritual world — antidemocratic, anti-Jewish, anti-rationalist German thought — that will also produce Nazism"; a fact that helps to account for "the Nietzschean pretensions of this or that Nazi as well as the Nazi strays of this or that Nietzschean."

In the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche railed hyperbolically against the nihilism and degeneracy of the modern age. As is well known, he harbored a special animus against the institutions of representative democracy, which he dismissed as a cabal engineered by the weak to deprive the strong of their right to rule. Invoking the fall of the Roman Empire as his precedent, Nietzsche expressed the hope that, in the near future, "barbarians of the twentieth century" would deliver the denizens of modernity from their collective misery.

With the Nazi seizure of power of January 30, 1933, Nietzsche's prophecy was realized beyond his wildest dreams. (Be careful what you wish for!) In this respect, perhaps it was Nietzsche himself who unwittingly bequeathed to us the most sagacious cautionary tale concerning the perils of French Nietzscheanism.

Suffice it to say that French Nietzscheanism is light years removed from the worldview of those fascist intellectuals who, during the 1930s, sought to instrumentalize Nietzsche's doctrines for the ends of National Socialist *Machtpolitik*. Nevertheless, the raucous debate that has tracked the NYU Title IX controversy has helped crystallize longstanding concerns related to the academic left's alacritous assimilation of Nietzsche's critique of morality as little more than "false consciousness": an ideology suitable for weak-minded conformists.

The conundrum may be restated as follows: once one has, following Nietzsche, rejected the claims of morality and truth, all that remains is "power" or "interest." And if that is the case, there are no inherent grounds compelling us to defend one perspective as "right" or "just" rather than another. More importantly, by smugly renouncing the language games of "justice" and

“fairness,” as “left Nietzscheans” are wont to do, as ruses of social control, we deprive ourselves of an idiom of moral reasoning that is irreplaceable and invaluable.

Among contemporary authoritarian national populists — political demagogues who seek to revive a brand of xenophobic nationalism that, by all rights, should have perished in 1945 in the *Führerbunker* — a corrosive cynicism with respect to democratic norms of justice and fairness has become the default rhetorical mode. This means that, for those on the left who are striving to reverse this situation, the task of defending norms of justice and truth has become more urgent than ever.