

Nietzsche and Anarchism

An Elective Affinity and a Nietzschean reading
of the December '08 revolt in Athens

Christos Iliopoulos

Series in Politics



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To all those fighting to
“Become Who They Are”

To Alba, for the Pan within

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Christos Iliopoulos
Athens, February 2019

Foreword

In the separate correspondence he maintained with Peter Kropotkin and Friedrich Nietzsche, the eminent literary critic Georg Brandes failed to convince either that they had anything to gain from considering each other's work. For his part, Kropotkin regarded Nietzsche as a toxic influence; his beguiling prose misled anarchists into committing the most outrageous acts purely in order to experience the thrill of transgression. In response to Brandes' suggestion that Nietzsche revise his blistering critique of anarchism and give Kropotkin a second glance, Nietzsche chose to remain silent.

It would be easy to conclude from this mediated exchange that anarchists and Nietzscheans have nothing to say to each other and that there is little to be gained from probing the relationship. Indeed, some historians of anarchism believe that haughty elitism was the only lesson Nietzsche ever taught the anarchists. Nietzsche scholars have similarly accentuated the negative, finding little to excite them in anarchism beyond Michael Bakunin's fleeting association with Sergei Nechaev, a relationship that provides an entry point to the kind of utopian, destructive nihilism that Dostoevsky depicted in *The Devils* and satirised in *Notes From Underground*.

This book sets out an alternative and far more productive, creative view. It discusses the elective affinity between anarchism and Nietzsche in the history of ideas and adopts a Nietzschean anarchist lens to explore anarchist activism – the December 2008 Athens revolt. It invites us to set to one side all that we think we know about Nietzsche and the anarchists and in doing so, it offers new perspectives on both. No airbrushing is involved. The familiar linear histories of Nietzsche's thought are set out in considerable detail. Nor are anarchists shoehorned into a philosophical space that ill-suits them. We are shown why anarchists including Emma Goldman and Gustav Landauer were so excited by Nietzsche's work and how they incorporated his ideas into their anarchism. But more importantly, we are also shown how and where ideas that were floating in the nineteenth-century ether found parallel expression in the work of writers who claimed they had nothing in common, except their mutual contempt.

Pushing against the rising tide of anarchist conceptual analysis, this study describes anarchism as a fluid, libertarian politics. Nietzsche bridges a gap between anarchism and unorthodox Marxisms, allowing Walter Benjamin to find a place in an anarchist history of ideas. Softening anarchism's ideological boundaries the analysis also dampens the jarring epistemological clash that so many contemporary political theorists have used to distinguish prepost

from postanarchism. Nietzsche is not a champion of anti-Enlightenment thinking who exposed the vulgarity of anarchism, but the philosopher who walked an analogous path.

The desire to find the overlaps and cross-currents in ideas and to reject oppositional thinking is part and parcel of the commitment to reflect critically on anarchist practices and learn from past actions. The last section of *Nietzsche and the anarchists* does this by setting the December revolt in a longer history of resistance which explains post-war party politics to contextualise the reaction to the crash. Yet this is not a conventional social movement case study. Zarathustra is brilliantly deployed to present a three-stage account of the revolt. The unique Nietzschean anarchist frame illustrates the dynamism, power and passions unleashed in and through the revolt in a fast-changing political situation. It equally highlights the revolt's constraints, shining a bright light on the construction and role of revolutionary anarchist identities. *Nietzsche and the anarchists* does not bemoan a lost opportunity for philosophical reflection; it courageously salvages a relation to open up new perspectives on political action.

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Case Study

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