The Critique of European Nihilism. Interpretation, Responsibility, and Action

Jon Wittrock and Mats Andrén

Focus: Nihilism

The Critique of European Nihilism.
Interpretation, Responsibility,
and Action

JON WITTROCK* and MATS ANDRÉN**

*School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, 14189 Huddinge, Sweden.
E-mail: jon.wittrock@sh.se
**Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of
Gothenburg, PO Box 200, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

The concept of 'nihilism' is ambiguous and has had and continues to be attached to several different usages. This special Focus primarily looks at the ways in which 'nihilism', in and following the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, has been understood as specifically tied to a crisis of European culture or civilisation, and has come to be politicised in conjunction with the National Socialist and Fascist movements in Germany and Italy during the twentieth century. Specifically, the individual articles deal with the connection between an understanding of nihilism and what it entails for the question concerning political responsibility. This introductory article presents this thematic, introduces the other contributions, and attempts to situate these debates on nihilism in the context of processes of secularisation. The article retrieves three major themes in relation to the critiques surveyed in this special Focus: nihilism as a crisis of beliefs and values, as an appropriation of religious elements into ideological grand narratives, and as the unshackling of an instrumental approach towards reality, and argues that all of them remain relevant to contemporary debates.

As a polemical concept, nihilism can be used to denounce individual thinkers, or perceived currents of thoughts; accusations of nihilism have been directed at philosophers as far apart in space, time and style of thinking as Baruch Spinoza and John Dewey;[1] its roots have been identified in the very origins of the Judeo-Christian heritage, as well as in the writings of René Descartes,[2] some have stressed that, 'the critique of European culture at the end of the nineteenth century directly or indirectly became a radical political critique that … eventually contributed to its overthrow and the rise of totalitarian forces.'[3] Others have accused postmodernism and/or post-structuralism of nihilistic tendencies.[4] The architecture of the twentieth-century

metropolis, too, has been tied to nihilism,[5] as have a number of other modern and contemporary developments.

The term nihilism, a linguistic construct built upon the Latin *nihil*, or 'nothing', seems to entail the affirmation or description of an absence, a lack, a rejection, or a denial. But what, in that case, is lacking, or what is being rejected, or denied? This is where answers differ and various suggestions have been proposed in attempts to define nihilism, or to understand a perceived condition of nihilism within Europe, Western civilisation as a whole, or even globally. Thus, it may be that the presence of any external reality is denied, or moral values, or any meaning or purpose intrinsic to the universe. It may be a question of denying the existence of God, as well as the possibility of attaining secure knowledge, or the legitimacy of justifying statements of fact. There have been 'nihilists' striving to destroy the existing socio-political order, as well as 'nihilists' who accept the validity of scientific knowledge but reject any objective normative order.

Being confronted with such a multiplicity of conceptual significances and philosophical and political stances, we are forced, within the confines of a single special Focus, to choose to explore a few crucial aspects of what has been called nihilism. Thus, we will focus on conceptualisations of nihilism as a specific European phenomenon, tied to a historically rooted critique of European culture or civilisation, forcefully formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and then appropriated, built upon, and reformulated.

We will focus, then, on Nietzsche and his understanding of nihilism as well as on the important Italian Fascist thinker Julius Evola, but most contributions concern a group of thinkers woven together by professional as well as personal relationships, but split apart politically by the coming to power of the National Socialist regime in Germany, and who all formulated critiques of nihilism, using that term, as a phenomenon closely bound up with their political standpoints. We will examine the theme of political responsibility in conjunction with conceptualisations of nihilism – how we are to judge the political responsibility of the thinkers whose notions of nihilism are under investigation here, but also whether there is a relevant contemporary understanding of responsibility to be retrieved, for us, in relation to how we understand an eventual crisis of nihilism.

Nihilism and the Critique of European Culture and Civilisation

The concept of nihilism was used occasionally throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; a letter from Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi to Johan Gottlieb Fichte, in which the former complained that the latter's idealism had turned into 'nihilism', denying all knowledge of an external reality, is often seen as a starting point for the critical-philosophical usage of the term.[6] It was in late nineteenth-century Russian intellectual milieus, however, that the term first gained a wider popularity, as the young radical character Bazarov is described as a self-proclaimed nihilist confronting conventional morality and ways of life in Ivan Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*: 'Silence reigned for several moments on the terrace. Pavel Petrovich sipped at

his cocoa and suddenly raised his head. "Here's our nihilist gentleman coming to pay his respects", he said under his breath.'[7]

Henceforth and throughout the following decades, nihilism became a crucial term in Russian cultural and political debates, in which it designated a host of radical philosophical and political stances – 'nihilism itself hardly exists', one critic remarked, 'although there is no denying the fact that nihilists do.'[8] Nihilism, to many, seemed to represent the prospect of liberation from oppressive and perhaps obsolete traditions, something that attracted radicals desiring social and political change, both male and female – while there was the male *nigilist*, there was also the female *nigilistka* (Ref. 8, p. 100).

These nihilists, however, were not necessarily attracted by the prospect of institutional change; some of them, rather, became persistent individualists, replacing collective action with an 'inner rebellion', entailing a certain distance to the surrounding world and a personal rejection of the validity of its customs and values. Nevertheless, we should observe the crucial and indeed recurring conceptual figure of a desired movement, whereby supposedly obsolete customs and traditions are rejected, thereby opening up prospects for novel and hopefully more fruitful practices.

The major philosophical force in the formulation of nihilism as both a problem and a development carrying with it its own possible resolution, however, was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose genius it was to portray, and perhaps to identify (depending on one's own stance) nihilism as a sweeping movement of occidental history. This makes, at the very least, for a fascinating narrative and it has come to subsequently capture the attention of many both within and beyond German-speaking intellectual milieus. Nietzsche's diagnosis (the term is not accidental; Nietzsche was a thinker obsessed with health who precisely saw himself as examining the state of European civilisation in terms of its hidden pathologies) seemed to imply that the devaluation of the previously acknowledged highest values – stemming ultimately from the belief in a deity, or at least in a supernatural or metaphysical realm beyond the ordinary world of the senses – opened up a spiritual or cultural abyss in the midst of the bustling technological advances of his own contemporary Europe, thus calling those very advances into question, while simultaneously proclaiming the promise of a reborn culture or civilisation beyond a perceived movement of decay.

The notion of a cultural or spiritual abyss in the midst of processes of societal rationalisation and technological advances became a common feature within German-speaking philosophy during the twentieth century, attracting thinkers and writers from all over the political spectrum, from Max Weber to his pupils, such as Carl Schmitt and the conservative revolutionaries and writers such as Ernst and Friedrich Georg Jünger, to theorists on the left, prominently but not only those associated with the Frankfurt School. Crucially, such strands of thought, inspired by Nietzsche, came to fruition in the period following the end of the First World War in a host of analyses of the role of modern technology and associated demands for a thinking concerned with responsibility, and with the aim of addressing its consequences. Several thinkers focused on the dangers, not of technology primarily or simply in the sense of technological systems and devices, but rather in terms of

underlying cultural, metaphysical or spiritual dispositions, which allegedly pervade, often without being perceived, technologically advanced societies.

Thus, for many thinkers the relation between interpretation and political action came to the fore in attempts to grasp what a perceived condition of nihilism ought to entail for issues of individual and collective responsibility. This question seemed at the time, and still appears today, particularly pertinent when considering how various intellectuals responded to the rise and taking of power of the National Socialist and Fascist movements. Thus, a great deal of the debate concerning nihilism and collective politicisation has been concerned with the triumph and subsequent demise of National Socialism in Germany and Fascism in Italy.

The Politics of Nihilism: Presenting the Contributions

Nietzsche spoke specifically of 'European nihilism' and asked: 'Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?'[9] Regardless of our own stances on Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism, this arguably raises at least two questions of continuing relevance.

On the one hand that of which goals to adhere to, i.e. which values or aims guide our course of action, individually and collectively On the other hand there is the question of existential meaning, where we have to inquire into the very meaning of meaning: as purpose, or as the depth of experience; as a transcendental orientation towards the future or a metaphysical domain transcending (but perhaps pervading) this world, or as an immanent immersion in the present, in each and every moment.

In his late notes, as Ruth Burch observes in her contribution, Nietzsche mentions six different forms of nihilism, arguing for a turn from 'incomplete' to 'complete nihilism' as a precondition for moving beyond nihilism altogether. Nietzsche, Burch notes, perceived nihilism not as an end state, but as an intermediate one, and one that he suggested could have the function of selecting those who are strong enough to pose their own goals and projects. Nietzsche has of course been enormously influential and, to many, remains supremely relevant. However, during the devastating developments of the first half of the twentieth century, not only did Nietzschean themes come to be appropriated within the confines of National Socialist propaganda, but the notion of nihilism itself developed in different directions and was used as a tool to both affirm and criticise Fascist and National Socialist political movements and narratives.

Amongst those tying the ascendancy of National Socialism to modern nihilism we find the philosophers Karl Jaspers and Karl Löwith. Jaspers, whom Mats Andrén takes on in his contribution, wrote critically about the growing extension and influence of nihilism during the 1930s, and found it partly expressed by the spread of technology and a reigning faith in progress. However, after the Second World War, he concluded that the political fanaticism of National Socialism had been triggering nihilism, and that the level of violence during the war was a further expression of it.[10] As Andrén shows, there is a tension in Jaspers' concept of nihilism, as the latter is understood as both an inherent element of existence, and as something highly

dangerous and worrisome. Thus, Jaspers ventured forth from an anthropological view of nihilism as a necessary part of existence, but came to use the concept critically in order to focus on the dangers of a lack of responsibility in the face of modern technological developments, e.g. in nuclear technology, a critique that remains relevant today, Andrén argues.

Karl Löwith published his essay on European nihilism when the Second World War had been going on for two years. For Löwith, nihilism emerges as the obvious background to the war and indeed as an explanation for the fact that Germany had come under the sway of Hitler. National Socialism and the war are presented by Löwith as a peak of nihilism, while also being linked to a religious, political and cultural disintegration of Europe that goes further back in time – Löwith points to literary modernism, and especially the modern novel, with the argument that the latter does not specify how reality can be transformed. A certain philosophical tradition is also seen as a carrier of nihilism, from Hegel to Marx and Kierkegaard, and on to Nietzsche whose ideas were appropriated by the Third Reich in its cult of the leader.[11]

Hannah Arendt also saw great dangers in the disconnection of European modernity from its traditions – a large part of her works attempts to come to terms with the horrors of totalitarianism and to retrieve from classical and Judeo-Christian traditions practices that can mitigate the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action: 'Nihilism', Arendt writes in a late essay, 'is but the other side of conventionalism; its creed consists of negations of the current, so-called positive values to which it remains bound.'[12] There are no easy or self-evident remedies to the threat of nihilism in this sense, but Arendt tried to retrieve desirable elements of political freedom, promise and forgiveness from the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions, as well as to build on a Kantian notion of an enlarged mentality, to take the standpoint of others into account.

Two of the most prominent and influential – then and now – German intellectuals, Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, however, both came to actively endorse, after its takeover, the National Socialist regime; but both of them also claimed, afterwards, to have become disillusioned by it. Hjalmar Falk's contribution analyses the tangled critical and conceptual relationships between Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt and Friedrich Gogarten. Focusing on Löwith's critical designation of Schmitt's 'occasional decisionism' as a form of 'active nihilism', Falk performs a critical reading, investigating the wider frames invested in the contrasting perspectives revealed. While acknowledging Löwith's observation that Schmitt and Gogarten came to hasten the nihilistic tendencies they claimed to counter, particularly through their decisionist affirmation of concrete authority, Falk asks whether the true issues of contestation here are to be found in questions of abstract or groundless 'decisiveness'. What truly seems to separate the investigated thinkers is not the question of decision under conditions of groundlessness, but rather the conditions themselves. Falk finds the root of dissent between Löwith and the pair of Schmitt/Gogarten in the question as to whether history can and should be invested as a ground of meaning in the first place.

Richard Polt's contribution focuses on Heidegger's 1933–34 seminar *On the Essence and Concept of Nature, History, and State*, in which he discussed the relations

between people, state, leader, and political space, in order to suggest an anti-nihilist political philosophy. Heidegger, Polt shows, claimed to see a great potential in National Socialism. In other words, Heidegger was, at this stage, using nihilism as a critical concept in order to support dictatorial politics. National Socialism, Heidegger seemed to hope, would be able to restore a 'rooted, hierarchic way of life'; however, in addition to the moral and narrower political problems with his views, Heidegger arguably failed even from a conceptual standpoint to offer a convincing political philosophy along these lines. Polt specifically points to Arendt's insights into the importance of plurality and the public sphere, noting that Heidegger failed to perceive and articulate the effects of the destruction of the latter during the early years of National Socialism.

For Heidegger, the issue of nihilism came to be tangled up with his reading of Nietzsche, and while we may debate to what an extent his mid-1930s lectures on Nietzsche really entailed, as he came to claim, a hidden confrontation with National Socialism, it is surely the case that he shifted, during the 1930s, from a more active stance to one stressing reflection and restraint in the face of spreading global nihilism.[13] For the rest of his life, Heidegger remained sceptical of collective, political action, stressing instead the transformative possibilities of thought and language, and of those simply waking up to the dangers of nihilism in the midst of global technological and political developments. Schmitt, on the contrary, never ceased advocating and hoping for political action, even after Germany was defeated.[14] Common to both of them, however, is the insistence that while National Socialism may not have fulfilled its promise and was probably flawed from the outset, an underlying nihilism unites a host of political movements of the modern world, since all of them are based upon an instrumental rationality run amok, whether in the guise of war or peace, authoritarian rule or liberal democracy.

Jon Wittrock thus argues in his contribution that there is much that unites Heidegger and Schmitt – both describe a threat, common to all ideological options and political systems of the modern world, of facilitating a reduction of the entire planet and all upon it to a reserve of resources, or as Schmitt puts it, 'into a combination of produce warehouse and aircraft carrier.'[15] After the failure of National Socialism to deliver on its promises of a German renewal, avoiding the traps of both capitalism and communism, Heidegger concluded that this movement, too, belonged to that same 'technological frenzy'.[16] Thus, the 'Second World War,' Heidegger announces late in his life, 'decided nothing…',[17] in the sense that for all of its armed violence, it did not fundamentally halt the spread, globally, of a dangerous dynamic entailing the reduction of everything to resources. By way of conclusion, Wittrock situates the two respective critiques in relation to Jaspers' notion of an 'Axial Age', in order to articulate in which way Schmitt's polemic, despite many similarities, appears 're-active,' following from Heidegger's understanding.

In 1936, as Polt observes, Heidegger described both Mussolini and Hitler as anti-nihilists. But more than a decade earlier, in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), commenting on Mussolini's speech before the March on Rome, Schmitt writes that 'Just as in the sixteenth century, an Italian has once again given expression

to the principle of political realism.'[18] In her contribution, Elisabetta Cassina Wolff deals with another figure in the Italian political and wider European and Western intellectual landscape, Julius Evola, who wrote extensively on modern nihilism, with its decadence and decay, and held up traditional values and a spiritual hierarchy in opposition to it. Evola was especially concerned with showing a way to those who resisted the perceived degeneration of modernity and its false belief in progress. Thus, he argued in favour of an organic, hierarchical, anti-egalitarian and elitist political system, in Italy and potentially all across Europe, ideas that exerted a considerable influence in Italy after the end of the Second World War.

Nihilism and Processes of Secularisation

What is striking is that, for all the debates surrounding nihilism and National Socialism, and for all of the thematic overlap, there is still such a great degree of disagreement on what exactly nihilism entails and whether, and if so how and to what extent, National Socialism represents its peak or whether, on the contrary, that movement was only yet another example of modern nihilism. That essentially con- tested concepts abound is, by now, a cliché, but it is still one worth keeping in mind. Rather than claiming that there is some core uniting all of these various notions of nihilism, what we seem to be in need of is some convenient way of structuring and clarifying their fundamental differences, in order to then approach, in a more satisfactory manner, the questions of nihilism, responsibility and political action.

Furthermore, when approaching the theme of nihilism as an alleged condition of European civilisation, it is not enough to rely on notions of moral, epistemological, or even cosmic nihilism, as a denial of the possibility of legitimacy or of justifying moral or epistemological assertions, as a denial of the existence of God or an objective reality, or even as the disruption of tradition implying that the hitherto guiding values or aims have become obsolete. While many thinkers do approach the subject in this manner, some of the more crucial ones, such as Heidegger, do not, or discern an underlying, more important dynamic at work here.

From the outset, the topic of nihilism has been closely connected with questions concerning secularisation – from Nietzsche and onwards to the thinkers following in his path, nihilism as a critique of European culture or civilisation is tangled up with the question of Jewish and Christian traditions and institutions. It seems that, when focusing on this particular thematic, then, one ought not only to take secularity in relation to Jewish and Christian elements into account, but that this very relationship could serve as a way to structure the various critiques of nihilism. This approach could also provide the key to unlocking the question of nihilism and political action. Viewed from this angle, critiques of nihilism as a cultural or civilisational malaise typically put at least two key questions to modern and contemporary politics, con- cerning, firstly, the empirical accuracy of notions of secular politics, and secondly, the desirability of such visions. Furthermore, we ought not to restrict ourselves here to questions concerning belief in a deity, or the affirmation of a set of aims, values, or ideals; we must also keep in mind the role of practices and institutions, too.

The term secularisation originally referred to the shift of, for example, a person or a piece of property from an ecclesiastical to a non-ecclesiastical context.[19] However, it gradually came to be used in increasingly wider and more abstract ways, as thinkers tried to grasp the various processes at work in Europe and the world at large during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both in the decrease of power and influence for many churches, but also in the growth of grand ideological narratives that could compete with, and at times violently confront, religious narratives and institutions.

Several of the more prominent critics of nihilism have focused on the migration of conceptual figures, of descriptive narrative elements as well as aims and ideals, from theological to ideological contexts – for example, in *Meaning in History*, Karl Löwith maintains that 'The *Communist Manifesto* is, first of all, a prophetic document, a judgment, and a call to action....'[20] In *Political Theology* Carl Schmitt claims that 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts....'[21] And in *Contributions to Philosophy* Martin Heidegger insists that 'The transcendent … is the God of Christianity … This "transcendence" is denied and the "people" itself … is put forth as the goal and purpose of all history.'[22] However, we must remember, again, that there has also, arguably, been a migration of practices and institutions, from religious to ostensibly secular settings.[23]

It would be preferable, then, not to speak of secularity as a static condition, opposed to equally static religious conditions, but rather of processes of secularisation and indeed de-secularisation,[24] and perhaps re-secularisation, in relation to which criteria we choose; i.e. Church attendance, or adherence to certain aims or beliefs, or the public support of and collective participation in rituals, tied to shared symbols, and so forth.[25] And it is in this conceptually and empirically ambiguous terrain, then, which is difficult to navigate, that we propose to situate critiques of nihilism as a wider cultural or civilisational development. Thus, nihilism has been perceived in terms of the disruption of tradition, in the sense of loss of a transcendent element, disconnecting European civilisation from its metaphysical foundations, but also in the sense that received values are handed down without reflection and engagement, that they have lost their force of genuine conviction, which makes them vulnerable to being exchanged easily and dismissed lightly, or renders them unable to inspire action beyond mere lip-service. As Arendt puts it, addressing wider European developments, 'in passing from hand to hand', cultural values 'were worn down like old coins. They lost the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of arresting our attention and moving us.'[26]

However, similar positions on this issue can result in widely diverging political standpoints. Thus, while for Arendt this analysis helps to explain the horrors of National Socialism, a similar view led Heidegger, at least initially, to support it. To further complicate matters, Löwith's claim that much of modern politics is dominated by political ideologies that represent a dangerous movement of appropriation, within an immanent, historical framework, of theological figures, is close in some respects to both Heidegger's and Schmitt's views on the same matter – yet, again, the concrete political standpoints and diagnoses vary. Conversely, while Schmitt and

Heidegger both agree that nihilism largely consists of a great risk of reducing everything to resources according to an unrestrained instrumental logic, this follows, according to Schmitt, from the disconnection of European civilisation from a transcendent, metaphysical orientation, concretely manifested by Christian institutions, while for Heidegger it represents, rather, the culmination of a process beginning with metaphysics and transmitted within Christian institutions.

It may be tempting, then, to dismiss diagnoses of nihilism as little more than conceptual tools and sweeping narratives, used to justify the concrete political standpoints of their respective authors, or to affix an emotionally charged label on those phenomena they dislike, whether these be ideological movements or technological systems, and to conclude that we have to resign ourselves to the fact that people simply speak of different processes and that, even when there is overlap, this may prove of relatively little contemporary relevance. Perhaps nihilism, as a term, is simply superfluous, and adds little to a discussion that could equally well, and with greater clarity, be conducted without it?

This would probably be too hasty a conclusion, however. The fact that different thinkers have drawn different conclusions does not in itself imply that all of these conclusions were wrong. Rather, some of them may have been mistaken, while others were not. Furthermore, we can, after all, discern at least three major, overarching and sometimes overlapping themes within the respective critiques of nihilism:

  (i) A crisis of aims or values, tied to grand narratives. Either in the sense that widespread Judeo-Christian elements are disrupted and no longer adhered to, or that they are reduced to being embraced by way of a superficial adherence, but are no longer compelling.

  (ii) An appropriation of elements from theological contexts into ideological ones, in a movement of transformation and reinterpretation, so that Judeo-Christian eschatological and apocalyptic figures of thought are replaced by ideological ones, tied to immanent historical narratives.

  (iii) The unshackling of an instrumental approach to reality, so that tendencies to describe and act towards not only other human beings, but also one's own self, animals, objects, and the fundamental categories of reality, come to be perceived primarily in terms of a reserve of resources to be utilised, and come to be handled accordingly.

While all of these diagnoses may be questioned and many nuances can be added to the sometimes gloomy pictures presented by some of the critics referred to above, they nonetheless do seem relevant against a modern and contemporary horizon. Ultimately, it comes down to the question of whether we can retrieve something of value from these respective critiques – this seems to us to be the key issue to be considered. Not whether there is one single core that unites them all, or whether they are indeed correct in every aspect but rather if they provide fruitful paths forward, to be developed when critically approaching our own contemporary situation, and perhaps giving rise to suggestions for shared, political solutions.

Reforming Nihilism?

Marx's proclamation in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach has become famous: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.'[27] This very much captures dilemmas surrounding not only critiques of capitalism, but of nihilism as well: as nihilism came to be understood as a symptom of a deeper cultural or spiritual crisis haunting European civilisation, the question that naturally arose was what to do about it. Marx's theories concerning capitalism have given rise, obviously, to individual responses, but also to revolutionary as well as reformist collective, political mass movements – but what about narratives on nihilism? Why could or ought these latter not similarly be capable of inspiring collective, political responses, or serve as the conceptual and inspirational foundations for political regimes and mass movements?

At first glance, the respective narratives of Marx and Nietzsche, on capitalism and nihilism, seem to have a lot in common: both claim to see through the surrounding ideological surface of their own contemporary times, and to perceive a deeper historical movement that also opens up the prospect of a radical change in the near future, in order to move beyond destructive present tendencies. The most contentious issue here has been the infamous usage of Nietzschean themes by the National Socialist movement in Germany, which seems to imply that if critiques of nihilism have indeed been politicised and put to use within mass movements, this development has been largely destructive. As Nietzsche's thought came to be politicised and used in collective projects, notably and most abhorrently by the National Socialist movement in Germany, then, the notion of changing the world in response to an alleged situation of nihilism appeared extremely problematic. For some, the disillusionment with National Socialism seemed to imply that collective, political action was futile in the face of the dissemination of global nihilism. Thus, Heidegger, after the end of the Second World War, came to reverse Marx's famous statement, insisting that 'changing the world', indeed, 'requires beforehand that thinking be changed.'[28] For many, as we have seen, National Socialism came to be considered itself as the peak of modern nihilism.

However, returning to the three overarching themes outlined in the previous section, which can be found within the respective critiques of nihilism, it is not clear why any of them would be intrinsically impossible to address within the framework of a democratic community, and indeed via collective solutions, even in a kind of reformism, to extend the analogy with critiques of capitalism. Thus, turning to the first theme, that of nihilism as a loss of faith or crisis of aims or values, this can be seen to be addressed in suggestions for an extended democratic deliberation, as proposed, for example, by Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. Such suggestions can indeed be seen as a response, not to secularisation in the sense of a decrease of religiosity, however defined, but to the coexistence, within the same democratic communities, of different communities of faith, and of people who self-identify as religious as well as those who do not. In Rawls's formulation, it is a matter of not allowing for particular beliefs to come to determine what he calls '"constitutional essentials" and questions

of basic justice', common to the community as a whole.[29] The point of ideals of public reason and democratic deliberation, then, is not to exclude or criticise certain beliefs but, as Habermas puts it, 'to enable their equally entitled coexistence within the same political community.'[30] However, the extent to which proposals for an increased democratic deliberation can really effectively address not simply a fragmentation of different ideals, but a perceived weakening in the commitment to any ideal, remains an open question. Chantal Mouffe, for one, has drawn on Carl Schmitt's thought in order to defend an agonistic conception of democratic deliberation, hoping that it may revitalise democracy and counter the dangers of lethargy as well as the transformation of agonism into violent and oppressive antagonism.[31]

Habermas not only admits that his 'conception of language and of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding nourishes itself from the legacy of Christianity,' but has also proposed that it is the task of critical philosophy to 're-express what it learns from religion in a discourse that is independent of revealed truth.'[32] This brings us to the second theme, of nihilism and the migration of conceptual figures from theological to ideological contexts, often implying a kind of immanent eschatology. Now, it must be stated that it is not even clear why this would be, in itself, a problem. Rather, the issue here seems to be whether elements appropriated from theological traditions can be justified or not – descriptively, or at a normative level. To the extent that we are describing not simply an appropriation, but a movement of reinterpretation, the origin of such conceptual figures does not by itself determine their descriptive or normative validity. Hence, many of the debates surrounding the eventual status of Marxism as a kind of pseudo-religious tradition, while interesting from the standpoint of the history of ideas, remain unclear as to their actual implications. The core normative issue is not whether there has been a migration or to what extent there are analogies between theological and ideological conceptual figures and narratives, but whether such conceptual figures and narratives appear desirable or not.

The post-war era indeed saw the establishment of norms of human rights, in response to the horrors of National Socialism, and Habermas has recently asserted that notions of human dignity, which he considers to be the 'the moral "source"' of all basic rights, can be traced back to 'the medieval discussions of human beings' creation in likeness to God … Everyone must face the Last Judgment as an irreplaceable and unique person.'[33] This, however, brings us to the third theme, of nihilism and the unshackling of an instrumental approach to reality. For it is the contention of Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger that an instrumental logic is increasingly allowed to guide the relationships of human beings to other human beings, to the self, and to the wider natural world as well as to space and time, in such a way that these can and frequently are reduced to a reserve of resources.

Towards the end of his lectures on Nietzsche, Heidegger turns to Goethe's famous *Über allen Gipfeln* (*Wandrers Nachtlied*), claiming that 'what is simple in the "is" of Goethe's poem is far removed from a void indeterminacy that cannot be grasped. The simplicity of rare abundance speaks in the poem.'[34] Heidegger repeatedly speaks of poetry and poetic thinking as a way of expressing an experience of wonder and awe,

but he does not seem to believe, in the end, that artistic practices alone could counter the dangers of what he perceived to be the threats of global nihilism. Furthermore, he does not seem terribly interested in suggesting, solutions based upon collective, political action within the framework of a democratic community. This, however, does not entail that doing so would be impossible.

Marx and Engels once famously claimed, exaggerating somewhat, that with the development of capitalism, 'all that is holy is profaned'[35] – however, while some things have indeed been profaned, others have, arguably, been sacralised.[36] Movements of de-sacralisation are usually ambiguous: while some domains are de-sacralised and opened up to ordinary usage, there also tend to be counter-movements of what can arguably be labelled as re-sacralisation.[37] The sacred is an ambiguous category, not only in the sense of referring to experiences of both wonder and terror, but also because it can be seen as either implying certain types of behaviours, of reverence and respect, which can be surrounded by social norms as well as hierarchies, or as relating to a spectrum of experiences of wonder and awe. It can, that is, be considered as either primarily a phenomenological or a behavioural category. The two can and often do coincide, of course, but the point is that this is not necessarily so.[38] Religious traditions incorporate not only norms of behaviour in relation to other living beings and one's own self, as well as narratives on history, but also norms of reverence and respect in relation to, as well as a restraint on the circulation and usage of, certain artefacts, natural objects, sites, and temporal intervals. However, to the extent that this status is denied, this does not necessarily simply imply that nothing is sacred – it could also imply that anything could become so.[39]

Contemporary liberal democratic communities do incorporate shared norms, legal as well as informal, concerning shared symbols and rituals, analogous but not identical to those that can be found in religious communities, most clearly in conjunction with the symbols, practices and narratives of nations.[40] However, matters are further complicated by the fact that symbols and rituals exemplify an even wider range of options of withdrawing certain living beings, objects, spatial sites, and temporal intervals from ordinary usage and circulation. Here, on the one hand, it is a matter of restrictions on the ordinary usage and circulation of objects and people as well as areas and temporal intervals. This is exactly what rituals do, and what we do with symbols, sites, artefacts, temporal intervals and people when we assign them a special status. On the other hand, it is a question of experiencing something in an openness to wonder and awe, which justifies an attitude of praise. Both can be found in conceptualisations of the sacred.[41]

Such a withdrawing of certain domains from ordinary usage can be used in order to reproduce specific hierarchies and attain certain aims, and that calls for a further reflection on the role of the sacred and corresponding categories, whatever terminology we wish to use, in conjunction with supposedly 'secular' politics. Furthermore, the sacred and corresponding categories, both as characterised by behavioural and phenomenological properties, may be utilised not only in collective, political action, but also by market-forces, and hence, this more general function ties into overarching debates concerning public and private, and the desirable reach of the forces of commodification.[42]

There are at least three important points to be made here, by way of conclusion. First, as religious traditions are relativised against each other as well as scientific epistemologies and ontologies, and as national narratives and practices are challenged, this may result in a critical gain: we may be forced to consider at greater length the very function of withdrawing certain domains from ordinary usage, and how this reflects how we relate differently to them, whether by recourse to religious narratives, or supposedly secular political ones. So there is a potential gain here in critical reflexivity. Secondly, this may force us to consider the normative status of such actually existing practices: are they desirable or not? Thirdly, we are confronted with the question as to the general normative status of such practices within post-national and trans-national politics, as well as in attempts to formulate norms on a global scale: ought cosmopolitan projects, too, advocate shared rituals and symbols, or not? Ought we to embrace the protection of certain domains on a global scale, or rather to welcome movements of de-sacralisation and the increasing reach of our capacities to approach time, space, objects, and living beings in terms of resources to be utilised?

To the extent that national narratives and practices are challenged in the contemporary world, as ideals and in terms of concrete political practices and institutions, and as yet further domains are incorporated within the circle of commodification, this only strengthens the need for further reflection on this issue[43] – this, indeed, would seem to be the responsible thing to do.

Notes and References

1. H. Skulsky (2009) *Staring into the Void: Spinoza, the Master of Nihilism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press), and P. K. Crosser (1955) *The Nihilism of John Dewey* (New York: The Philosophical Library).
2. Cf. M. A. Gillespie (1995) *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press).
3. D. Ohana (2009) *The Dawn of Political Nihilism. Volume I of the Nihilist Order* (Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press), p. 2.
4. Cf. W. Slocombe (2006) *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern: The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge), p. 78.
5. M. Cacciari (1993) *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), p. 199.
6. Cf. F. H. Jacobi (1987) Open letter to Fichte. In: E. Behler (ed.) *Philosophy of German Idealism* (New York: Continuum).
7. I. Turgenev (2008) *Fathers and Sons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 24.
8. Nikolai Strakhov quoted in R. Stites (1987) *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 99.
9. F. Nietzsche (1968) *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House), p. 7.
10. K. Jaspers (1947) *Der Philosophische Glaube* (München: R. Piper & Co Verlag), p. 103.
11. K. Löwith (1995) 'European Nihilism' Reflections on the Spiritual and Historical Background of the European War. In *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 181–208.

12. H. Arendt (2003) *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books), p. 177.
13. Cf., for example, M. Heidegger (2003) *Philosophical and Political Writings* (New York & London: Continuum), p. 33.
14. Cf., for example, the chilling ending of Schmitt's posthumously published (1991) *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–1951* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), p. 320.
15. C. Schmitt (2003) *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press), p. 49.
16. Cf., for example, P. Lacoue-Labarthe (1990) *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 34.
17. M. Heidegger (1976) *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 66.
18. C. Schmitt (1988) *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), p. 76.
19. Cf., for example, H. Lübbe (2003) *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber), p. 23.
20. K. Löwith (1967) *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), p. 43.
21. C. Schmitt (2005) *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), p. 36.
22. M. Heidegger (2012) *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 21–22.
23. For a recent study on the case of the French Revolution, cf. A. Velicu (2010) *Civic Catechisms and Reason in the French Revolution* (Farnham: Ashgate).
24. Here one should of course mention J. Casanova's study of the 'deprivatization' of religion in (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press).
25. It should be noted that, according to Carl Schmitt in his work on Thomas Hobbes, it was exactly the fact that Hobbes, albeit supportive of a shared, collective worship, separated inner faith from outer confession, that opened up the gates towards political secularisation in Europe; cf. C. Schmitt (2008) *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), p. 125.
26. H. Arendt (2006) *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books), p. 201.
27. K. Marx (with F. Engels) (1998) *The German Ideology including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books), p. 574 (emphasis in the original).
28. M. Heidegger (1998) *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 338.
29. J. Rawls (2005) *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 214.
30. J. Habermas (2001) *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 128.
31. Cf. C. Mouffe (2005) *On the Political* (Milton Park: Routledge).
32. J. Habermas (2002) *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press), pp. 160, 164.
33. J. Habermas (2012) *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response* (Cambridge: Polity Press), pp. 75, 89.
34. M. Heidegger (1991) *Nietzsche, Volume IV: Nihilism* (New York: HarperCollins), p. 190.

35. Cf. K. Marx and F. Engels (2012) *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London: Verso), p. 38.

36. The latter half of the twentieth century, and up until the present day, has seen intense debates on processes of secularisation, and their alleged reversals or counter-movements, often by comparing Europe as an exceptional case to other parts of the world; cf., for example G. Davie (2002) *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), and P. Berger, G. Davie and E. Fokas (2008) *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and its Variations* (Burlington: Ashgate). While. For example, J. Casanova in (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), speaks of a *deprivatisation* of religion in recent decades, P. Norris and R. Inglehart (2011) *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), maintain that the general trend is nonetheless one of diminishing existential risks entailing a loosening of the grip of organised religion, even in the US, if one controls for certain factors. The entire debate is obviously complicated further once we start to question the very conceptual pair of 'religious' and 'secular', i.e. why would the rituals of the nation, or the grand narratives of allegedly secular ideologies, indeed be 'secular', and not 'religious'?.

37. N. Tumarkin (1997) *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 264, recalls the anecdote of a competition for a statue of Alexander Pushkin: third prize went to a statue of Lenin reading Pushkin, second prize to a statue of Pushkin reading Lenin – but first prize went to a statue of Lenin. And any visitor the Ho Chi Minch Museum in Hanoi should have a look at the small Japanese 1960's transistor radio contained there in a glass box, on account of having been a gift from the Soviet Union. The strangeness of that object, venerated within that glass box, is immediately striking.

38. Indeed, as T. Asad observes in (2010) Toward a genealogy of the concept of ritual. In: P. J. Stewart and A. Strathern (eds) *The International Library of Essays in Anthropology: Ritual* (Farnham: Ashgate), p. 237. 'The semantic distinction between "outward sign" and "inward mentality" is in fact an ancient one and has been drawn by Christian reformers throughout the ages.'

39. Cf., for example, K. Cavarra Britton (ed.) (2010) *Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press), K. Oliver (2013) *To Touch the Face of God: The Sacred, the Profane, and the American Space Program, 1957–1975* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press); D. Cowan (2010) *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television* (Waco: Baylor University Press); F. Berkes (2012) *Sacred Ecology* (New York & London: Routledge); and R. Scruton (2012) *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures 2010* (London & New York: Continuum). Some, like S. Critchley, in (2012) *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso), p. 25, have come to see, 'with no particular joy', much of modern and contemporary politics in terms of metamorphoses of the sacred. Our point is that, whether we welcome or dislike such developments, they call, by themselves, for a deeper reflection on the functions of the sacred and corresponding categories, which may not necessarily be called by that name.

40. It is hardly surprising that so many scholars on the subject, despite their differences in other respects, have pointed to the analogies between nationalism and organised religion. According to some, nationalism has served as a kind of replacement in this respect; C. Hayes claims, for example, in (1960) *Nationalism:*

A Religion (New York: Macmillan), p. 15, that developments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in 'a kind of religious void … for large numbers of people in modern Europe and the contemporary world … any such void is unnatural, and an urge arises to fill the void with some new faith.' And W. Parker claims in (1984) *Europe, America and the Wider World: Essays on the Economic History of Western Capitalism, Volume 1: Europe and the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 231, that 'Europeans … seemed increasingly to need in politics, as they once had needed in religion, an intercessor between the individual and the universal, an object of tangible love on a grand scale [...] It was not simply a political necessity, but a psychic hunger that the national idea fulfilled…' Several theorists have pointed to such similarities more recently, for example J. Smith (1994) *Quasi-Religions: Humanism, Marxism and Nationalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan); B. Anderson (2002) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso); and A. Smith (2001) *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press). Strictly speaking, however, national narratives, rituals and symbols typically neither entirely replace, nor function in an identical way to, those of organised religion. Furthermore, religious elements may become part of national narratives.

41. These ambiguities can be clearly perceived in classical, indeed canonical, works on the sacred, such as E. Durkheim (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press), R. Otto (1950) *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); and M. Eliade (1987) *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando: Harcourt).

42. This is not only a question of the reach of the commodification of objects, but also of landscapes and bodies as well as of time: an important part of early industrialisation in England consisted of the destruction of traditional holidays, removed from the world of work. Cf. M. Perelman (2000) *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (Duke University Press: Durham & London), p. 17.

43. Tensions between national symbols and supra-national ones have been clearly visible in the development of the EU, for example in the transition from the rejected Constitutional Treaty to the Lisbon Treaty, a development that entailed both a rejection of the explicit reference to the EU's shared symbols as well as a hesitance to clearly and concisely state the actually recognised primacy of EU law over national law; cf., for example, J.-C. Piris (2010) *The Lisbon Treaty: A Legal and Political Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 23, 81–89. Trans-national and cosmopolitan democratic projects ought certainly to reflect on the proper locus, if any, of shared, publicly supported symbols and rituals, but also on the role presently carried out by narratives on nations in withdrawing certain domains from ordinary usage and hence restraining tendencies towards commodification.

About the Authors

Jon Wittrock holds a Doctorate in Political and Social Sciences of the European University Institute, where he successfully defended his PhD thesis, entitled *Beyond Burgenland and Kakanien? Post-National Politics in Europe: Political Justification and Critical Deliberation*, in 2008. His major interests are in critical and political

theory, and especially the intersection between religion and politics, where the meaning of neither of these concepts is in any simple way taken for granted. He has also focused on German philosophical critiques of nihilism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and argued for their continued relevance in the contemporary world.

Mats Andrén is professor in The History of Ideas and Science at the University of Gothenburg and affiliated to the Centre of European Research at Gothenburg University (CERGU http://www.cergu.gu.se//). His earlier research was into the history of economic ideas, on the ideologies of students, on Central European identities and on local citizenship. He has recently published *Nuclear Waste Management and Legitimacy: Nihilism and Responsibility* (Routledge 2012). He currently carries out research on the idea of Europe.