

1. Friedrich Nietzsche and Economics: Research Problems

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Abstract This essay introduces the reasons why Nietzsche is interesting for economics. It also attempts to set the background for economics-focused Nietzsche scholarship by detailing the pertinent research problems regarding this highly complex and often misunderstood philosopher.

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1. WHY IS NIETZSCHE INTERESTING FOR US?

When Jürgen Backhaus and I first thought about a “Nietzsche and Economics” conference, my own assumption was not so much that he had contributed to economics directly, but that economists, especially “real” economists and business scholars with a hard-nosed propensity for – and I mean what comes now completely non-pejorative – legitimizing the selfish pursuit of private gains, would have turned to Nietzsche as a philosophically viable source (or foundation) for their, after all, traditionally suspect-as-immoral proclivities. A certain Nietzsche could easily have served as the strongest supporter of their views, for surely he was and is more sophisticated than any of the other protagonists of unalloyed egotism. There are, of course, those who, because of the use of a more scientific-looking approach, appear even stronger within a science-based culture (see Freyer, 1921), but Nietzsche does not even need the excuse that private profit-maximization will in the long run be in everybody’s best interest, or that it will be inevitable.

For me, one of the most interesting results of research leading up to the conference was that this has clearly not been the case at all. (Peter Senn’s contribution to this volume makes this amply clear, albeit indirectly, and with another impetus.) This could be viewed as a strong indictment of economics; after all, it appears that the discipline was not even able to utilize the philoso-

pher most fitting to its mainstream. (One of the contributions by Marcel van Meerhaeghe to this volume remedies this situation for one subfield.)

But there are other options for “Nietzsche and Economics” as well. In spite of his amazing impact during the 20th Century, Nietzsche is only coming into his own now; as Ernst Jünger has underlined, he was truly writing for the 21st century (Jünger, 2000, p. 245 *et passim*). Nietzsche is the great analyst of *our* times; by and large, it is difficult to argue that we do not live in a “Nietzschean” world.¹ It seems, thus, reasonable to search in Nietzsche’s work for what *could* be used for economics, both indirectly and directly – this, after all, is not exactly a discipline that could not do with some alternative perspectives and paradigms right now.

The time for such a research program is especially fortuitous, inasmuch as the anniversary of Nietzsche’s death in the year 2000, widely celebrated, has also provided us with some new research tools that could help in finding out more about Nietzsche and Economics:

- The finally viable, scholarly edition of Nietzsche by Colli and Montinari is available in a very cheap set edition (Nietzsche, 1999);
- Rüdiger Safranski has directed his magnificent powers of insight and style to Nietzsche by authoring an excellent biography (2000);
- Johann Prossliner’s compilation of Nietzsche quotes (1999), mid-brow at first glance, is a very easy access road to the various fields and topics Nietzsche talked about, including the economy (quotes 673-693, pp. 82-84);²
- the older but still useful edition of Nietzsche’s work by Karl Schlechta is now available on CD-ROM and thus very easily searchable (Nietzsche, 2000b);
- the catalogue for the Weimar anniversary exhibition provides detailed access to chronology and many details (Nietzsche, 2000a).

There is also a plethora of secondary and tertiary works and of other conferences.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEMS

In order to access Nietzsche for economics, however, we need to “put some trash out of the way”. This is especially necessary in this case, as, for Nietzsche scholars, many things are by now clear that are still not for the general, even the general scholarly, audience. There are also some specific problems related to Nietzsche’s work that need to be taken into consideration. Considering them, at least, should make further research more viable.