Commentary

Nihilism Reconsidered

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It is, in the interesting comments of Ungar and Woolfolk, not so much a question of criticism; it is a question of disagreement. Their conception of nihilism differs from mine, and I obviously failed to convince them of the plausibility of my view. Therefore, I will put forward some of my ideas again, taking their remarks into consideration.

First: what exactly was I doing in my article? I gave a sociological analysis of the use of the concept of nihilism. The difference between Woolfolk and me is that I make a very sharp distinction between an analysis of Western culture and a sociological critique of one element of that analysis: the implicit or explicit use of the concept of nihilism. By dismissing this one element in the analyses of Comte, Durkheim, or Tocqueville, on logical and sociological grounds, I am not dismissing their complete analyses, being perfectly aware that I am a dwarf, standing on the shoulders of these giants.

Ungar says that my analysis of nihilism is somewhat “elliptical.” I guess he is too polite to say that it is circular. I don’t think it is, but let me try to explain the structure of my argument. I am trying to do two things:

1. To show that the critique of nihilism is much older than Nietzsche and that it has a respectable tradition in France. Camus was wrong in saying that Nietzsche was the first. It is interesting to see that there is a continuity, so that Maistre’s analysis from the early nineteenth century is echoed in 1985 by Kundera (cited by Ungar). This is the history of ideas component of my argument.

2. To show why the concept of nihilism was used. This is the sociology of knowledge component. Now, to do this properly, the French tradition is much more appropriate than the better known German one, for two reasons: the social upheavals that accompanied the process of modernization were manifest and more frequent in France, with every generation having its own nation-wide revolution; and the intellectuals participated more actively in every social or political issue. That makes for a setting that is more appropriate for a sociological analysis than the German situation. In Germany, upheavals were suppressed, and the intellectuals hardly participated in the political debate; so it becomes a bit difficult to relate ideas to social positions. Ideas tend to be politically neutral. This is the reason why the German use of the concept has a metaphysical rather than social or political scope and could be more systematic, aspire to universality, and therefore dominate intellectual life in this century. German thinkers latinized and coined what Joseph de Maistre during the French Revolution called “rienisme”: nihilismus.
This is the structure of my argument. It is a bit complicated, but I don’t see why it should be “elliptical.”

But these are historical considerations; let us turn to the main systematic aspects. Ungar and Woolfolk are so friendly to admit that I have a point in unmasking the concept of nihilism as a label. But according to Ungar, the use of “nihilism” as a label is only a deplorable incident. I think it is more. Woolfolk goes much further, and says that my analysis “obscures and ignores what a study of the idea might clarify about the dynamics of Western culture.” I, on the contrary, think that the concept of nihilism obscures a proper insight into these dynamics. If one labels people as nihilistic, one is not able to see the values that guide them. One can’t see what they are doing, and why they are doing it, why they may be successful, and what the consequences of their success might be. Therefore one misses the dynamics of cultural change.

Let me give an example. Woolfolk says that I don’t “recognize . . . that the systematic tracking down (into the impulsive unconsciousness, the will to power, etc.) of all settled beliefs and convictions has foreshadowed very modern forms of fanaticism in which there were no militant ideals and fixed beliefs at stake (consult Hannah Arendt on Nazism and Communism, for instance).” Here, as often, nihilism is presented as the bitter end of an erosion of values. This vision is, due to its German metaphysical origin, too idealistic. We should recognize that the crisis of values and beliefs that we are talking about is part of a very complex social, economic, and cultural crisis. And the problem with systems like Nazism and Stalinism is not that they had no values, but that they had very strong values. These were absolute, and no doubt was allowed. They did not come into being because they were nihilistic, but because they fitted very well into the traditional value systems that were in a crisis. This gave them their enormous appeal in their countries.

In my opinions, we should study the complicated ins and outs of these crises and their consequences, instead of assuming a linear cause and effect relation between skepticism and nihilism that can be used to discourage or even stigmatize every relativist.

A second example comes from Ungar. He suggests that the “amoral” nuclear planning of the United States is due to nihilism. Knowing the massive slaughtering in the Old Testament or in the thirty years war, I would suggest that massive slaughtering and the absence of faith have nothing to do with each other. The planning of death may be cynical, but that does not make it nihilistic, for there are many values at stake: belief in technical power, belief that democracy of the American type or even Christianity is worth the threat of genocide, and so forth. But one misses all these questions, if one simply ascribes the whole thing to nihilism. One cannot even understand the short-sightedness of the nuclear planners. As Steven Kull (1988) shows, the existence of nuclear warfighting scenarios is due not so much to a lack of values, as to the tenacity of traditional military values centering on concepts such as “victory” and “offence” that make up what he calls the “conventional mindset.” So I think that the making of these kinds of plans does not prove that the Americans are living in a nihilistic era, and the reactions to it also seem to prove that they do not. Most of them are very moralistic, in one way or another. The Jews in the Old Testament did not feel guilty about the massacre of Jericho (Joshua 6), but many Americans feel guilty about their government’s plans for extinguishing the Russians, who were, by
the way, not executed at the time that this could be done without the risk of any retaliation. It seems to me that the moral standards of some Americans are very high indeed. They even concern deeds not done; and these are so far below them that they appear as "sheer power," that is to say, as nothingness, as nihilism.

Here again, a sociologist can get a deeper understanding of what is happening if he analyzes social phenomena in terms of a relevant tradition, for instance, as a heritage of puritanism and its morality of good intentions combined with the power of democratic openness — than by labeling it as nihilistic.

Nihilism may be a concept appropriate to analyze some metaphysical questions that underlie Western culture. But, defined as the total lack of (true) values and norms, it is not a good instrument for analyzing culture, as far as culture is a social phenomenon. It is contrary to the basic assumption of sociology: that there is no community or society without common values, norms, and rules. Surviving together presupposes common values. That the concept has been used, nevertheless, by the best analysts of society in their best works, can only be explained by the nihilating power the concept has. Saying that enemies have no values and therefore are pure nothingness, makes them less threatening. That it is also used by lesser gods, in the same way, only reinforces the plausibility of this thesis.

The conquest of nihilism, unlike what Alfred Weber called for, does not consist in the making of a new morality (values and norms are not "made"), but in the overcoming of a bias. We, as analysts of society, should do what we are hired for: investigate the ins and outs any value system, even if we fear or hate or detest it.

This is my main thesis, and my critics do not make me doubt it. But there is another point, in which I am a bit less outspoken. Both Ungar and Woolfolk fault me for maintaining that the concept of nihilism disappeared. I was very careful in saying this. I prophesied that it would come back from time to time, because it has become a prestigious and sophisticated weapon in the hands of intellectuals, who will use it when there are crises in our value system or our way of life, but that it will never regain the strength it had in Germany and France around the turn of the century (ter Borg, 1988:14). The counter-evidence that Woolfolk gives does not convince me. Most of the books he mentions concern the history of ideas and did not provoke a fierce discussion that dominates intellectual life on the disappearance of Western values in the present. This is my criterion, and I admit that it is rather vague. Therefore, let me give an example. If the book by Alan Bloom (1987) would turn out to be more than just another bestseller, and if his analysis of "Nihilism, American Style" would be the beginning of such a discussion, lasting for several years, then I am wrong in this respect.

For the time being, I am very pleased to find that Bloom's use of the concept of nihilism is another example of my main thesis: that the use of the concept of nihilism has a nihilating function. According to him, the American mind has become "a chaos of the instincts or passions" (1987:155), relativistic, hedonistic, short sighted, unreflective, unaware of its roots in three thousand years of Western thinking, egoistic, materialistic, and so on. God is someone who helps you to get Gold at the Olympics; Beethoven has been definitively beaten by disco. That's the situation (and, as far as I can see, America has not the sole privilege of this in the Western world). I sympathize with
his analysis. But why call the cultural situation nihilistic? There are plenty of values. Hedonism is a value or a set of values, and ascetic training during several years for the Olympics is a value. There is nothing nihilistic about it.

What has happened (among other things), is that there has been a process of democratization in the widest sense. Values are no longer set by the happy few, by the intellectual, the reverend, and the university professor. They are set and modified by the happy many. That means a loss of power of university people as far as defining of good and bad is concerned. That power, of course, has always been overestimated by intellectuals, but since the university was opened to all in the 1960s, and has become overcrowded by the happy many, intellectuals cannot deny this bitter truth any longer.

Bloom is very disappointed. Things are not going in the direction that has always been his ideal. On the contrary, it is going in the reverse direction. He, as a University Man, is confronted with this every day. He tries to master it, if not in reality, then intellectually, by calling it nihilistic.

This is the same as what I described for the time around the French Revolution: if my world can't be, then nothing will be (ter Borg, 1988:10). But there is a difference between what Maistre and Comte and others experienced and Bloom's deception. In the nineteenth century, the whole society was at stake. In Bloom's case, it is only the brilliant articulation of the uneasiness of elderly university professors. So his analysis is a minor incident, and therefore I still do not expect that the discussion of nihilism will become a big issue again as long as we live in a democratic society, based on technology, mass production and consumption, and so forth. If this changes, for instance because the situation of the environment deteriorates, a crisis that concerns our way of life may occur. In that case the concept of nihilism might play an important role again. And I might repeat my plea for a genuinely sociological analysis of that crisis.

REFERENCES


