Weakening and Strengthening History

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Abstract: Despite suggestions that the end of metaphysics leaves us with nothing but history, essential questions about the place of history in a post-metaphysical culture have been neglected. In one sense history “weakens” as the scope for “realism” or a teleological master narrative fall away. But it invites overreaction to suggest that history becomes a “process of weakening” insofar as things have come to be as they are not as the resultants of full, meaningful origins, but only through the “dread accident” of the historical process. The world that has resulted from history is the only one we have, and it weighs on us; in that sense history does not weaken but strengthens. Still, the historical process enveloping us is not Hegelian and necessary but weak and contingent, its outcomes subject to further contest. Conversely, although truth is weak, finite, and provisional, it is not merely consensual or relative precisely because it is historical. To grasp the sense in which history both weakens and strengthens enables us to grasp the scope for learning more deeply from our historical experience. A fuller range of historical questions about modernity would enable us better to understand the ongoing dangers and possibilities of modern politics.

As a practicing historian, I have not been a regular participant in the discussion surrounding Gianni Vattimo and pensiero debole, but I have recently published a book on totalitarianism that I believe is relevant to that discussion, and I have adapted Vattimo’s notion of “weakness” as I have intervened in debates concerning the present situation of historiography.¹ The opportunity to contribute to this number of Iris has prompted me to read, among other things, Weakening Philosophy, a set of essays in Vattimo’s honor, published in 2007, and on that basis to ponder anew how my activities as a historian relate to the advent of pensiero debole.²

In my 1995 book Nothing but History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics, I considered the implications of the end of metaphysics for the cul-

tural place of historical inquiry and understanding. I had written an earlier book on Croce – not the putative neo-Hegelian system-builder but the absolute historicist – and in Nothing but History I situated Croce in the lineage from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Gadamer, Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty, seeking to show how, by treating them all together, we might better map the post-metaphysical terrain.

I noted that the waning of metaphysics seemed to occasion a sort of inflation of history, so that a wider range of cultural roles seemed to open for historical understanding. But I also noted a tendency toward certain extreme positions, and though I found some of them fruitful, others seemed prejudicial, indicating confusion and overreaction. Such extremes have provoked, among many practicing historians, a defensive “realism” or an aggressive indifference toward “theory.” The result has been a polarization in current historiographical discussion pitting “new” historians against “old,” and generally postmodern theorists against practitioners. Such polarization reflected a wider lack of dialogue, or connection, between historiography and the “weakening philosophy” surrounding the end of metaphysics. On the basis of the position I developed in Nothing but History, I have continued to try to show the scope for a more fruitful interaction.

In doing so, I have found myself repairing again and again to Vattimo’s notion of “weakness,” though I adapted it somewhat loosely as I spoke of weak truth, weak process, even weak totality. I have sometimes claimed to be seeking a new “middle ground,” but that notion may mislead, because I find the negation in the lineage from Nietzsche to Vattimo and Rorty entirely convincing. So it is not a matter of saying that “maybe something foundational is left after all.” What I sought to specify was not some compromise but a way of heading off overreaction by showing the scope for a constructive or reconstructive orientation, alongside certain new extreme positions, in a post-metaphysical culture.

The frustrations I have encountered in dealing with an Anglophone audience may surprise, or amuse, not least because much in Weakening Philosophy takes for granted what many of my readers seemed unwilling or unable to grasp. Even my reference to “after metaphysics” in the subtitle to Nothing but History encountered incredulity. Note, for example, the combination of casual dismissal and stern scolding in a review by Margaret Jacob, who merely concluded that “all peoples have metaphysics all the time and our job now is to rescue the genre from Nietzsche and Heidegger’s errant grandchildren.” Jacob is an author of Telling the Truth about History, which attracted many more

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readers than my own book did. Yet she and her co-authors, Joyce Appleby and Lynn Hunt, lacked the intellectual-historical depth to point convincingly beyond the current polarization and to assess the situation of historiography with the waning of metaphysics.

At the same time, others among my critics could do no better than to charge that I myself was merely positing another metaphysics. They seemed unable to grasp a point that is often explicit in Weakening Philosophy — that to accent hermeneutics, or pensiero debole, or absolute historicism is not simply to replace what has dissolved or been deconstructed with something on the same level. Recognition that it cannot be replaced with something comparable is essential to what has happened; the question is what we are left with, what we can say, where we go from here. Whatever we can say will not be suprahistorical, foundational, metaphysical but merely historically specific — how it seems to us now. What we have to deal with is this “now,” or “being as it is given to us today,” as Santiago Zabala puts it. Of course any such offering is only an interpretation; of course it can only be an effort to persuade as part of an ongoing conversation, not a claim to privilege or an effort to “rule” this or that.

So I am glad to be in the present company, but the task of mediation between post-metaphysical philosophy and history remains not only central but difficult. Although it is widely accepted that the end of metaphysics entails a changed relationship between philosophy and history, it seems to me that we need further thinking — and more dialogue between philosophers and historians — about that relationship and its implications for our understanding of both our particular history and the terms of a post-metaphysical historical orientation more generally.

Whereas some, claiming to follow the French, have taken pleasure in proclaiming “that there really is no such thing as ‘history’” in light of Nietzsche et al., any such notion is too glib even for Nietzsche and Heidegger, and it certainly does not apply to such post-metaphysical thinkers as Vattimo and Rorty. Vattimo notes that “hermeneutics is not a philosophy but the enunciation of historical existence itself in the age of the end of metaphysics.” Paolo Flores d’Arcais contends that the truth of being presents itself only

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6 Zabala, in WP, p. 21. For other good examples of this line of argument in WP, see Zabala, p. 18; Rorty, p. 152; and Flores d’Arcais, p. 255.
historically; history is the history of the truth of being. Zabala suggests that a weakening philosophy redirects humanity toward history. Moreover, as Giacomo Marramao notes, both Vattimo and Rorty recognize that Western nihilism is historically and culturally situated.

In short, with the turn from metaphysics we are left not with a heap, or mere flux, or sheer becoming, or discontinuity, but with “historical existence,” even a more radically historical world. However, what this says about the place of “history” in the post-metaphysical cultural economy, about how we might relate to it and situate ourselves within it, is not so clear. How are we to conceive the relationship between the historicity of individual existence and our own continuing history, which has so far yielded this, this particular provisional resultant, our world, the world with which we must deal, even as we recognize that it has no transcendent sanction? What role for, or premium on, a specifically historical mode of inquiry and understanding? Although metaphysics was in one sense defined by the effort to transcend history, historical inquiry obviously was done, even as metaphysics affected not only how it was done but also assumptions about its cultural role. So what are the implications of the end of metaphysics for the practice and cultural role of historiography? In treating history or the past, should we say whatever makes us feel good? Surely we may and can do so, but why would we want to, and what might we do instead and why? Is it lapsing back into authoritarian “realism” to try to persuade that another orientation is preferable? What is the scope for actually learning from history, and how might any such learning relate to political action?

Despite all the suggestions that the end of metaphysics directs us toward history, specific questions about the place of “history” in the post-metaphysical cultural program seem to me surprisingly absent in the discussion surrounding pensiero debole. A plausible concern to head off still-metaphysical positions yields a premium on constantly retelling the story of the end of metaphysics, but thus the discussion, especially in its Heideggerian dimension, often revolves around what is likely to seem to outsiders a kind of esoteric wisdom. This tendency obviously complicates any effort of mediation to historians, many of whom simply conclude that this rarefied stuff is irrelevant to what they do. Insofar as those involved in the weakening of philosophy settle for that esoteric wisdom, write about each other, and do not in fact reach out to historians, the culture loses an opportunity better to assess our cultural possibilities and, on that basis, to head off overreaction, to overcome polarization, and to learn more deeply from our own history.

9 Flores d’Arcais, in WP, p. 260.
10 Zabala, in WP, p. 19.
11 Marramao, in WP, p. 78.
In one sense, of course, “history,” too, “weakens” in a post-metaphysical world. There is no scope for “realism,” conveying history as it really was or actually happened. Moreover, we no longer conceive history as a strong, teleological process. Yet it has been confusion over these issues that has most impeded dialogue and occasioned extravagance and polarization.

While insisting, provocatively, that historians merely find ways of “getting the story crooked,” Hans Kellner noted that “‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are, of course, the primary authoritarian weapons of our time.” Kellner is a leading disciple of Hayden White, whose way of accenting the choices we have in emplotting our historical narratives has seemed to invite an edifying “sublime” orientation, which might entail personal empowerment, or perhaps some mode of aesthetic satisfaction, and deflect from any premium on truth.

Kellner is surely right about “truth and reality” in their strong forms, and appeals to them no doubt remain tempting – and still need to be resisted. But we must also consider the alternatives to such strong claims. Insofar as the scope for truth is at issue, it is widely held that the alternative to “realism,” or correspondence, is a reliance on consensual disciplinary standards. Yet the noted British historian Richard Evans, citing the example of Nazi historiography, argues that to rely on nothing but agreed-upon professional standards leaves us with a dangerous relativism; thus, he insisted, we must hold to a modified realism.

I have stressed the scope for “weak truth” in an effort to show that these are not the only alternatives. Yet the place of truth is a bit ambiguous in pensiero debole, in light of Vattimo’s way of adapting Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Sometimes he seems to want the “radical dissolution of the very notion of truth,” taken as inherently metaphysical and authoritarian. Yet Zabala assures us that “the hermeneutical nature of our relation to the world by no means relinquishes truth.” But Zabala also tells us that “‘truth’ can be constructed only by an edifying consensus reached through dialogue.” The key is to specify how this differs from the mode of consensualism that Evans pointed to in Nazi historiography.

Pier Aldo Rovatti is surely on the right track in noting that what is at issue is a certain mode of responsibility, bound up with openness, a willingness to listen – or, we might say, a willingness to learn, which entails a willingness

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14 Vattimo, in WP, p. 408.
to be challenged, to risk.\textsuperscript{17} Up to a point, of course, this is basic Gadamer. But many have found Gadamer sometimes ambiguous, even betraying still-metaphysical elements as he spoke of the language of the things themselves.

As Jean Grondin notes, Vattimo has been prominent among those who find Gadamer not radical enough; thus Vattimo, as Grondin sees it, pushed beyond where Gadamer wanted to go. Insofar as Gadamer was indeed still-metaphysical, Vattimo may have been right to want to read selectively in order to develop a more consistently post-metaphysical position while still taking advantage of Gadamerian hermeneutics. But Grondin suggests that Vattimo was too eager – and was thereby glossing over something that Gadamer saw as culturally central. Vattimo was tending toward one of the extravagant extremes – a kind of nihilistic, “anything goes” perspectivism – that the postmodern turn has seemed to invite. Gadamer, Grondin implies, sensed that his own thinking could invite this dangerous overreaction and sought to head it off.

Grondin shows convincingly why Gadamer’s position does not reduce to any such nihilistic perspectivism, why we cannot simply say whatever suits us, why the truth of anything is bound up with the way it was or is, its actual coming to be. But in his effort to make this point, and thereby reign in Vattimo, Grondin accents essence in a way that seems to lead back to realism and correspondence, as if there might be, to follow his own example, a single correct performance of a musical composition or, by implication, a single true way of understanding something historically.\textsuperscript{18}

The question is how we might characterize the relationship between being and our language in a way that dispenses with the residual metaphysical dimension in Gadamer, but without going beyond him to Vattimo’s extent and thereby inviting postmodernist excess. Although the notion that we seek to “discover a language that is already the language of the things themselves” seems to suggest realism and correspondence, it proves not to entail some “thing in itself” that we might glimpse or approximate in our finite particular inquiries. The key, rather, is that the language of things requires dialogue, even “performance.” So just as we seek to eschew subject-object dualism, we must start with the dialogical relationship itself as opposed to one term or the other, conceived in isolation. “The things themselves” have their own language in the sense that what is at issue is a particular actual world, an eventing through which the world has become and is becoming this way and not some other way. We cannot say just anything in a historical account and call it true, just as we cannot perform a musical composition in any way we like and real-

\textsuperscript{17} Rovatti, in \textit{WP}, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{18} Grondin, in \textit{WP}, pp. 212-213.
ize its truth, convey its language. A concern with virtuosity and showmanship, for example, may compromise the revelation of the truth of the composition.

Insofar as Gadamer, fearing the overreaction, seemed to want to start with being, he appears essentialist and still-metaphysical. But generally he understood dialogue to be primary; we must start with dialogue to conceive the happening of this particular world, and it is through such dialogue that the happening continues. It is tempting to say that anything, whatever “is,” is not even “being” unless and until it comes to language, as at once particularizing and historical. But Gadamer’s noted dictum – “Being that can be understood is language” – seems to suggest otherwise. Still, insofar as the coming to be of being is eventing, is specifically historical, Gadamer’s dictum may be misleading.

What is the contrary of that dictum? That there is being that cannot be understood, and that thus has not come to language? That would surely be too close to mysticism. The alternative possibility is that such being simply is not, or has not been, understood. But in principle it could be – once we seek to understand it, once we open to its language through dialogue. However, we can only understand it in some particular way; we cannot say everything that could be said about the things themselves, but we can say something, even a set of things, that is congruent with the language of the things themselves. This suggests the finitude of the world and the particularizing nature of the process through which the world continually comes to be.

As with musical composition, being has its own language, but it requires some performance for that language to be realized, always as particularizing and historical. But there is no single right performance, so there is no essence as usually understood. The point, then, is not simply that our world has happened in some particular way but that even its happening must be endlessly “performed,” or given meaning, in some particular way, in our language, as central to the ongoing eventing. It is being’s need for dialogue in order to be – to be something in particular – that makes the world fundamentally historical. But Grondin is right that we need to maintain focus on the being in the Gadamerian dictum that “being that can be understood is language,” in light of our tendency, bound up with present agency, to overemphasize our language. That emphasis seems to invite us to say whatever we want, as if saying it as we choose makes it true. Still, we must also take care not to overemphasize Being as if it were conceivable as prior, with a given essence; it can be what it is only through the endless event of coming to language in human history – through, in other words, the further particularizing of the particular.

Gadamer speaks of the authority of tradition, to be sure, but that authority is weak and does not foreclose anything we might want to say, be capable of saying. Still, although the universe of what we might want to say is infinite in one sense, it is finite in another. The tradition makes possible whatever we
might decide to say, and whatever it is will return to the tradition, helping to expand it, if what we have said has any meaning at all (even as gibberish — or catachresis). And for Gadamer, almost exactly as for Croce decades before, truth happens insofar as we inquire and seek to persuade in a certain spirit, or ethical attitude, in light of our common care for what the world becomes. That is not the only attitude of which we are capable, however, and the history will of course continue however we respond. So we return to Rovatti’s point about responsibility, bound up with openness and a willingness to listen, to engage in dialogue. This is not to appeal to some human essence or regulative principle but simply to seek to persuade that a caring relationship entails a sense of responsibility, and with it a willingness to open and learn.

Truth is weak, partial, finite, provisional, but it not merely consensual or relative — and this, paradoxical though it might seem, is precisely because it is historical. It is because there is no one right way, reflecting some given essence, that the problem of relativism dissolves for Gadamer, almost exactly as for Croce a half-century earlier. To return to Grondin’s critique of Vattimo, the point is not, as Grondin sometimes seems to imply, that Vattimo should have accepted Gadamer as he stood, but that we need to, and can, find a way of leaving beyond the still-metaphysical tendency in Gadamer while still avoiding the tendency to invite “postmodern” excess that Grondin finds in Vattimo.

Seeking, plausibly and usefully, to head off any overly “irenic” emphasis on tradition and consensus, Flores d’Arcais notes that our inheritance is not something received but something decided about. Tradition always entails a choice among options, from within the chaotic, contradictory accumulation constituted by history so far. One *decides* even what to consider essential for one’s identity. But as Flores d’Arcais sees it, the inevitability of decision leaves Vattimo caught in a dilemma: either he pulls back to hermeneutics-as-metaphysics or he leaves us with the anarchy of conflicting voices — and mere will to power as the basis, insofar as a decision gets made. Flores d’Arcais recognizes that Vattimo wants to eschew “strong” meaning and telos — but also to show that we confer *some* meaning and establish *some* telos as we interpret what has happened so far. Because everyone is entitled to participate in this process by taking the risk of interpretation, we have multiple and conflicting histories of being. The problem, for Flores d’Arcais, is that no one such history can be preferable without some shared criterion, yet to establish such a criterion would be to construct another metaphys-

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ics. As he reaches his conclusion, Flores d’Arcais charges that Vattimo, if he is to claim that “the interpretative reconstruction of history is a rational activity,” must return to a quasi-Hegelian conception of the rationality of history, with rationality linked to necessity.20

A tendency to conflate any notion of historical coherence and meaning, and any premium on historical understanding, with Hegelianism has been a persistent problem in postmodern discussion. And because his way of framing the alternatives is too restrictive, Flores d’Arcais misses the scope for overcoming Vattimo’s putative dilemma from within a post-metaphysical framework, through what proves a weak understanding of process and totality. As part of the effort to persuade others how to understand some aspect of what has come to be, we appeal not to metaphysical foundations or to some certain criterion but to “higher”-level shared concerns and understandings. Insofar as persuasion takes place and we come to some measure of agreement, some subset of the conflicting interpretations establishes a conventional wisdom, adding to the tradition. We will thereby have established weak, post-metaphysical criteria – historically specific, subject in principle to further contest and alteration, bound up with the ongoing “eventing” that we continue to interpret. We are caught up in a historical process that is not Hegelian and necessary but weak and contingent, its outcomes merely particular and provisional. As only weakly unified, the process, and the totality that results from it, are always ragged, conflicted, and subject to further contest.

To be sure, it is only through the exercise of power that some particular interpretation settles out, becoming part of the tradition. But power is simply the neutral glue that enables the world to cohere, to become some particular way; the exercise of “will to power” is essential to the particularizing of the world in and through history. To say this entails no implication that might makes right, that whatever has come to be is justified, or that whatever is, is right. So the outcomes of power are not necessarily to be conflated with “domination,” from which we need “emancipation.” But we should, and do, make judgments about outcomes of power, and we may decide, and seek to persuade others, that we need to expose and deconstruct this or that particular crystallization. We can seek to deconstruct whatever outcome of power we choose, but to bleat about “power” itself simply diverts us from the particular task at hand. Power, too, can be understood in weak terms.

Zabala’s notion that “history is a process of weakening” is congruent with this notion of “weak process,” but we must take care in drawing out the implications.21 Zabala refers especially to Nietzsche’s argument that the more

20 Flores d’Arcais, in WP, pp. 258, 260-261, 266.
21 Zabala, in WP, p. 19.
we inquire into the origins of anything, the more insignificant those origins seem. In other words, we come face to face with the radical contingency of all that comes to be historically. There is no “good reason” or transcendent sanction for any of it. But history becomes “a process of weakening” only against a quasi-Hegelian backdrop. Even as we recognize the insignificance of origins, we recognize that things have come to be as they are, that we have this world and not some other, only through the “dread accident” of the historical process – as Nietzsche felt in all its weight. So it can mislead, and invite overreaction, to suggest that insofar as the process does not issue from full, meaningful origins, we are caught up in a weakening. The absence of such origins does not make history light, so that, for example, we might simply play with it. The world that has resulted is the only one we have, and it grabs us, weighs on us; in that sense history does not weaken but strengthens. To say this is not to return to Hegelianism but simply to specify the dimension of strength in the weak process through which the eventing occurs. Such strong weakness or weak strength is a measure of the middle ground.

With the end of metaphysics, we become suspicious of master narratives in the strong sense, but insofar as orientation can only be historical, it becomes more important than ever that we have some overall sense of the continuing event to which we belong. We understand that any such narrative will be weak, most basically because it will not be grounded, suprahistorically valid, but itself historical, provisional, ragged, contested. But we do need to ask big historical questions, as opposed to affording privilege, with Carlo Ginzburg, to “microhistory,” on the past moment in isolation, or even in its defiance of our understanding of the overall process.

Much of the discussion surrounding pensiero debole rests on an overall historical understanding – but it is one that, I suggest, remains too “strong.” Stemming especially from the Weberian reading of modernity, as given a particular spin by Heidegger, it entails a schematic but restrictive understanding of our history and its provisional modern culmination, based on a particular way of bringing together reason, science, technology, secularism, humanism, and historicism with the end of metaphysics. Thus, for example, Vattimo tells us in Weakening Philosophy that metaphysics ends when it culminates in the actual techno-scientific rationalization of the world, which removes every transcendence and transforms it into totally immanent presence.22 Is it really so clear how the key categories come together? The Weber-Heidegger master narrative was itself historically specific, and part of our task, as we discuss where we go from here, is to rethink, or at least to open the way to rethinking, our actual history or sending of being.

Rorty gives Vattimo credit for at least pointing in the right direction in suggesting that philosophers should stop trying to rewrite *The Critique of Pure Reason* and concentrate instead on rewriting the narratives in Vico, Hegel, and Marx, removing any suggestion of inevitability or claim to a privileged understanding. Precisely because professional historians tend not to ask such big historical questions – indeed seem, for the most part, quick to dismiss those who risk them – it would indeed be particularly valuable to have post-metaphysical philosophers turn to history. From my perspective, a Vichian rethinking, even to incorporate elements from Darwinism and pragmatism, might prove especially illuminating – and would suggest a different angle on the interweaving of agency, language, meaning, particularity, and technique in the history that has yielded our present.

As it is, however, such seemingly revelatory specifics as the Holocaust are too often simply plugged into the Weber-Heidegger master narrative, based on an *a priori* sense of what modernity makes possible. Even while usefully pinpointing certain limits in the thinking of both Adorno and Lévinas on the subject, Vattimo accepts the notion that the Holocaust, as theoretically grounded and rationally planned, reveals the connection between metaphysics and violence. At the same time, Marramao suggests, in disputing Rorty’s notion that philosophy might be decoupled from great historical events, that the Holocaust has affected our way of framing fundamental philosophical questions. But with our reliance on the Weber-Heidegger master narrative, have we sufficiently understood the Holocaust, how it came to be, to draw out its implications either for philosophy or our understanding of modernity?

The Holocaust emerged from within Nazi totalitarianism, which, taken more generally, might seem the most garish aspect of the modern world of “total administration.” But is the scope for such administration the key to understanding why and how the Holocaust came into our world? What else on the historically specific level, apart from suprahistorical impulses like “hate” and “evil,” made it possible at this point in history, as it would not have been earlier? Zygmunt Bauman’s widely admired account features modern instrumental rationality and bureaucratic momentum, but there proves much about the Holocaust that his accounts misses.

In pondering totalitarianism we still tend toward a kind of ahistorical essentialism that impedes the essential rethinking. We might recall, for

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23 Rorty, in *WP*, p. 152.
example, Rorty’s facile way of equating “fascism” with sadism or cruelty. Yet Derrida famously suggested that we do not yet know what Nazism was—and that we have yet to come to terms with the fact that Nazism was a Nietzschean politics. And of course we must ponder the place of Heidegger as well. Without much interpretive gloss, Grondin notes how anomalous it is that Vattimo seeks to deepen democracy on the basis of Nietzsche and Heidegger—an enterprise that would have seemed misguided in Germany.

The point is most assuredly not to suggest, with so many, that Nietzsche and Heidegger are discredited, proscribed. But we need a deeper understanding of the actual trajectory of totalitarianism, not only to renew the master narrative but also better to assess what we may or may not want to take from Nietzsche and Heidegger as we seek to specify cultural priorities and deepen democracy.

As it is, Vattimo finds the key to Nietzsche in Nietzsche’s way of conceiving the end of metaphysics through the unmasking of its violence. On the other hand, Vattimo deems Nietzsche’s constructive program problematic, so that it is hard to specify the place of eternal recurrence, will to power, and the overman. To Vattimo it seems self-evident, however, that Nietzsche could not have been simply inviting another mode of violence. But we cannot neglect Nietzsche’s “constructive program” to this extent, assuming benign implications just because of his critique of strong truth and the like. That program is elusive, but not so hard to decipher as Vattimo suggests here. What post-metaphysical paths open in the wake of Nietzsche? More specifically, how does the particular violence of totalitarianism relate both to the end of metaphysics and to Nietzsche’s ideas? Certainly Nietzsche was not simply inviting another violence, but his thinking could open the way to an even greater violence, as he himself surely recognized on occasion.

The inquiry into totalitarianism must indeed probe its relationship with “modern nihilism,” but to link them is not to find the answer but to open a universe of questions. Nihilism or fanaticism proves much too simple to characterize the totalitarian sense of possibilities and priorities, but what categories might deepen our understanding? What relationship with Marxism, or with the natural law tradition and its decline? Quite apart from Nietzsche and Heidegger, what might we learn from Giovanni Gentile, “the first philosopher

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29 Grondin, in *WP*, p. 204.

of totalitarianism,” in the judgment of the Soviet specialist Abbott Gleason?31 Above all, what historical consciousness characterized totalitarianism, and how was the emergence of totalitarianism related to the wider changes in historical consciousness bound up with the erosion of metaphysics? A deeper look reveals a more complex relationship between totalitarianism and history, including modernity, than we can grasp through the Weberian master narrative.

Any effort to renew the radical tradition especially requires a fresh examination of our recent history, including the trajectory of Marxism, the implications of the Leninist departure, and the relationship between the revision of Marxism and the advent of fascism. I find Vattimo too quick to repair first to the rhetoric of emancipation and liberation, then to globalization and the internet, in lieu of any such renewed historical inquiry. Only if we get beyond the dichotomies around tolerance, emancipation, oppression, technical administration, and the like can we learn more deeply from our historical experience. On that basis we could more fruitfully ponder the relationship between power and violence and the scope for concentrating power for ongoing reconstruction, without totalitarianism and violence. We could thereby better grasp the ongoing political dangers we face and the fresh political opportunities before us.

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