

## THE *VERWINDUNG* OF CAPITAL: ON THE PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS OF GIANNI VATTIMO

Ashley Woodward (The Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy)

*Gianni Vattimo occupies the relatively rare position of being both a prominent philosopher and an engaged politician. This article outlines Vattimo's philosophy of "weak thought" and his democratic socialist politics, and argues that there is a "gap" between them: his stated political positions seem at odds with aspects of his philosophy. This gap between the philosophical and the political is examined with reference to the topic of globalised capitalism. I then apply Vattimo's own strategy in reading other philosophers to his thought, attempting to draw out the possible political implications of weak thought against his own stated position. I do this through the application of one of Vattimo's central concepts, Verwindung ("twisting-free"), to globalised capitalism. I conclude with some reflections on the prospects for a politics of weak thought.*

In every area of our existence, especially politics, the job that awaits us is to start clearing away the dense undergrowth of metaphysical absolutes—a variegated flora, with the laws of the marketplace as a recent prize specimen.—Gianni Vattimo<sup>1</sup>

Gianni Vattimo is one of the most prominent philosophers in Europe today. He is Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Turin, and is well known in Italy and throughout Europe for his philosophy of *il*

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<sup>1</sup> *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, (tr.) W. McCuaig, (ed.) Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 44. Hereafter referred to as NE.

*pensiero debole* (generally translated as “weak thought”<sup>2</sup>). As well as being a prominent scholar, Vattimo is a public intellectual and politician; he is a prolific columnist on social and political issues for various newspapers<sup>3</sup>, and has in recent years served a term as a member of the European Parliament. Despite his active public engagement in politics, however, Vattimo’s academic work has only rarely taken the form of an explicitly political philosophy. He has published only one substantial book of political philosophy—1974’s *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (*The Subject and Its Mask: Nietzsche and the Problem of Liberation*)<sup>4</sup>—which no longer reflects either his current political views or his mature, and most influential, philosophy of weak thought. Indeed, he has indicated that the creation of weak thought was motivated by the reasons that led him to turn away from the political philosophy expressed in this earlier work.<sup>5</sup> Vattimo has, however, written a number of more recent essays discussing the relationship between politics and philosophy, the most important of which have been collected in his book *Nihilism and Emancipation*. These writings, interpreted in the context of Vattimo’s wider works, offer the outlines of a political philosophy of weak thought. Vattimo is a relatively rare example of an original and important philosophical thinker, who is also an actively engaged politician. My overall aim in this paper is to examine the relationship between his philosophy and his politics.

My first task here will be to introduce Vattimo’s philosophical and political thought, which remains relatively unknown in the Anglophone world. My second task will be more critical. Vattimo’s recent essays on political philosophy are brief and schematic, and raise a number of questions concerning the relationship between his philosophy and his own political activities and commitments. I will focus on only one of

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kearney suggests the alternative translation “fragile thought.” See his *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-Modern* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 190.

<sup>3</sup> The Italian newspapers: *La Stampa*, *Il Manifesto*, *L’Unità*, *L’Espresso*, as well as *El Pais* (Spain) and *Clarín* (Argentina).

<sup>4</sup> (Milan: Fabbri-Bompiani).

<sup>5</sup> See Santiago Zabala’s “Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy” in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, (ed.) Santiago Zabala (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 12–3. Hereafter referred to as ZI. This issue is discussed in further detail later in the present essay.

these questions here: the question of the implications of Vattimo's philosophy and politics for the critique of globalised capitalism. I will argue that Vattimo's position *vis-à-vis* globalisation, as outlined in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, is at odds with some of the key insights of his earlier ontological thought. I will then construct a model of a critical relation to capitalist globalisation that remains true to these insights under the heading of the title of this paper, the *Verwindung* of capital. In so doing, I will follow Vattimo's own strategy of reading philosophers against their explicit conclusions in order to develop their own thought in a more rigorous manner. At stake here is the suggestive possibility that Vattimo's weak thought contains so-far undeveloped potentials for a philosophical critique of global capitalism. Finally, I will critically examine some of the strengths and limitations of a "politics of weak thought," as I will have constructed it, by examining its capacity to uphold justice in the face of globalised capitalism. While the focus of this paper is the philosophy and politics of Vattimo, such an examination also serves to shed light on a thematic problem for postmodern, post-Marxist political reason: how to steer a safe course between foundationalism and vulgar relativism.

### **Vattimo's Philosophy: Weak Thought**

Since Vattimo's work remains largely unknown in the Anglophone world, some information regarding his intellectual biography may be useful in framing this introduction to his philosophical thought. Vattimo was born in 1936 in Turin. After obtaining a degree in classical studies (the *liceo classico*), he completed a doctorate at the University of Turin under the supervision of Luigi Pareyson, Italy's foremost existentialist philosopher. He then studied at the University of Heidelberg with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith, and began to gain international recognition with a well-received paper given at the Royaumont colloquium on Heidegger in 1966. Vattimo succeeded Pareyson as Professor of Aesthetics at Turin, and since 1982 has held the position of Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the same institution. He has been a visiting scholar at numerous universities, including some (such as Stanford) in the English-speaking world. Vattimo has translated Gadamer's *Truth and Method* into Italian, and is the leading promoter of philosophical hermeneutics in Italy. He has also devoted numerous books and essays to the

interpretation of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and has brought the theme of nihilism from these thinkers together with hermeneutics and the idea of the postmodern to formulate his own philosophy of weak thought, which coalesced into a general trend in Italian philosophy in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

Vattimo's philosophy is thus a syncretic amalgam of themes found in Nietzsche, Heidegger, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. The coherence of this eclectic mix is given in Marta Frascati-Lochhead's characterisation of Vattimo's work as a conversation-in-progress between Nietzsche and Heidegger, in which the voices of those who have addressed the questions raised by these two thinkers are also heard.<sup>7</sup> Vattimo's central project may be described as a hermeneutic ontology, which attempts to be an *ontologie de l'actualité*<sup>8</sup>, a philosophical interpretation of our "current situation." He works through interpretations of texts in the recent history of Western philosophy, especially those of Nietzsche and Heidegger and those writers who have engaged their problematics in order to develop an interpretation of the meaning of Being at this point in history. Vattimo reads Nietzsche and Heidegger together,

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<sup>6</sup> The event that crystallised this movement in Italian thought and sparked much debate concerning its merit was the publication in 1983 of the collection *Il pensiero debole*, edited by Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milan: Feltrinelli). (This volume has been translated into English as *Weak Thought* by Peter Carravetta. It is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.) For a fuller exposition of Vattimo's intellectual biography, see ZI and Jon R. Snyder's introduction to Vattimo's *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, (tr.) J. R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). Vattimo's *The End of Modernity* will hereafter be referred to as EM. For an account of the development of Vattimo's philosophical thought, see chapter 6 of Peter Carravetta's *Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Perdue University Press, 1991). For an overview of the Italian intellectual culture and tradition within and against which Vattimo's thought developed, see the Editor's Introduction in Giovanna Borradori (ed.), *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Vattimo employs this expression, coined by Michel Foucault, in "Postmodernity, Technology, Ontology," in *Technology in the Western Political Tradition*, (eds.) A.M. Melzer, J. Weinberger, and M.R. Zinman (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 214.

bringing out their substantial similarities and using each as a corrective for the other, to develop an ontological theory of the contemporary. The central theme of Vattimo's interpretation is the development of a positive conception of nihilism—understood as ontological and epistemological anti-foundationalism—as countering the problems of metaphysics identified by Heidegger. While Nietzsche and Heidegger contribute to Vattimo's thought in equal measure, in the interests of brevity I will focus these introductory comments around his interpretation of Heidegger.<sup>9</sup>

The crux of Vattimo's reading of Heidegger is a concern to show that he may be read as an anti-foundational, nihilistic thinker. This reading requires a certain “distortion” of Heidegger, in which some aspects of his texts are emphasised and turned against others in order to show that he did not always fully understand the implications of his own thought. Situating his interpretation in the field of Heidegger scholarship, Vattimo suggests that readings of this German philosopher can be divided into a “right” and a “left” camp.<sup>10</sup> The “right” interpretation focuses on Heidegger's suggestions that overcoming metaphysics requires a return to a grounding for thought and meaning through a renewed and more authentic relationship of man and Being. On this reading, metaphysics will be overcome through a return of Being, which has been obscured and cast into oblivion throughout the history of metaphysical thought.

The “left” interpretation, however, which Vattimo advocates, focuses on the suggestions in Heidegger's texts that any return to a grounding or foundation will be simply a reinstatement of metaphysics. As Heidegger notes in certain passages, it is a mistake of metaphysics to think Being as ground or foundation, understood in the sense of a stable structure or enduring presence.<sup>11</sup> For Vattimo, this foundational interpretation

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<sup>9</sup> For an outline of Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche, see my “Nihilism and the Postmodern in Vattimo's Nietzsche” in *Minerva—An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 6, 2002, 51–67. <http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol6/nihilism.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, (tr.) D. Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 13. Hereafter referred to as BI. Zabala explains that these terms should be understood as alluding to Right and Left Hegelianism rather than the political Right and Left. (ZI, 17)

<sup>11</sup> The textual evidence Vattimo most often cites in emphasising the interpretation of Heidegger as an anti-foundational thinker are the opening of *On Time and Being* and the end of “On the Essence of Ground.” Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, (tr.) J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground” in *Path-*

of Being is, in fact, the dominant meaning of “metaphysics” to emerge from Heidegger’s thought: thinking Being as a ground or foundation is precisely what obscures the ontological difference between “Being” and “beings.” Summarising this interpretive distinction, Vattimo writes:

Right, in the case of Heidegger, denotes an interpretation of his overcoming of metaphysics as an effort, in spite of everything, somehow to prepare a “return of Being,” perhaps in the form of an apophatic, negative, mystical ontology; left denotes the reading that I propose of the history of Being as the story of a “long goodbye,” of an interminable weakening of Being. In this case, the overcoming of Being is understood only as a recollection of the oblivion of Being, never as making Being present again, not even as a term that always lies beyond every formulation. (BI 13)

Vattimo asserts that the terms of Heidegger’s own thought do not allow a consistent and coherent notion of a “return” or a “remembering” of Being in such a way that this would overcome metaphysics and institute a new foundation for thought. Vattimo’s argument depends on Heidegger’s notion of Being as event (*Ereignis*), in which Being always “stays away” or conceals itself in the process of bringing beings (entities) to presence. Explaining the understanding of Being which Heidegger has made available, Vattimo writes that

[a]ll we can say about Being at this point is that it consists in trans-mission, in forwarding or destiny: *Ueber-lieferung* and *Geschick*. The world plays itself out in horizons constructed by a series of echoes, linguistic responses, and messages coming from the past and from others (others along side us as well as other cultures)... Being never really *is* but sends itself, is on the way, it trans-mits itself.<sup>12</sup>

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marks, (ed.) W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Vattimo develops this reading of Heidegger most fully in the essay “*An-Denken*. Thinking and the Foundation”, collected in *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, (tr.) C. Blamires with T. Harrison (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought”, (tr.) T. Harrison, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10, 1984, 157.

Understood as the transmission of linguistic messages which open interpretive horizons, Being is not something which could ever be thought as spatially or temporally present; rather, Being is always an echo from the past that makes the present possible. Being cannot be thought of as an objective, ahistorical structure, but only as a series of historical events through which cultural horizons are established.

On the basis of this argument, Vattimo gives a new interpretation of Heidegger's work on nihilism. Taking up this theme from Nietzsche, Heidegger understands nihilism as the forgetting or "oblivion" of Being in metaphysical thinking.<sup>13</sup> Vattimo argues, against the letter of Heidegger's texts, that the oblivion of Being is itself consistent with Heidegger's interpretation of Being as "event." Rather than understanding nihilism as a forgetting of Being that needs to be overcome, Vattimo understands ontological nihilism as consistent with Heidegger's own thesis about Being, in which it is "nothing" in the sense of being no "thing" that might be made present. In a passage which summarises the key move in his interpretation of Heidegger, and which may be taken as the key to the philosophy of "weak thought," Vattimo writes:

The overcoming of metaphysics can be realised only in the degree to which, as Heidegger writes of Nietzschean nihilism, "nothing is left of being as such." *The overcoming of metaphysics is not the overturning of the metaphysical oblivion of being; it is this very oblivion (nihilism) taken to its extreme consequences.*<sup>14</sup>

Vattimo links the ontological nihilism he derives from his interpretation of Heidegger with an epistemological nihilism found in Nietzsche: without a secure anchorage in Being conceived as foundation, all truth-claims are reduced to interpretations,<sup>15</sup> including, Vattimo concedes, his own

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<sup>13</sup> Heidegger writes: "Being itself necessarily remains unthought in metaphysics. Metaphysics is a history in which there is essentially nothing to Being itself: metaphysics as such is nihilism proper." Martin Heidegger, "Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being" in *Nietzsche: Nihilism* (Vol. IV), (tr.) D. Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 211.

<sup>14</sup> Vattimo, "Nietzsche and Heidegger", (tr.) T. Harrison, *Stanford Italian Review* 6.1–2, 1986, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche writes: "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena — "There are only

claims. This diminution of “strong” claims to truth and foundation explains why Vattimo names his own practice of philosophy “weak” thought.

Vattimo’s positive revaluation of nihilism can be understood as motivated by a critical opposition to what he sees as the *violence* of metaphysical thinking, violence directly related to its foundational claims. Vattimo’s specific definition of violence displays his debt to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and his pluralistic view of contemporary society as a complex fabric of disparate voices and competing interpretations. Violence, Vattimo asserts, is “the peremptory affirmation by an authority which forbids further interrogation, breaks down dialogue, and imposes silence.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense, metaphysics may be understood as violent because it manifests a suppressive authority in the form of a foundation: metaphysical thought limits the free play of dialogue and interpretation by silencing those voices that are not appropriately related to the foundation to which metaphysics appeals as an arbiter of legitimacy. The violence of metaphysics is thus a form of suppression, which limits the range of voices that are allowed currency.<sup>17</sup> This construal of metaphysics as violent, therefore, allows Vattimo to assert nihilism as something positive insofar as the rejection of any foundation serves the purpose of reducing such violence.

Moreover, Vattimo’s nihilism should not be understood as either simply a historical relativism, or as nihilism in an ethical sense (the denial of ethical values). While he construes Being and truth as events, and thus in an important sense relative to time and historicity, on Vattimo’s reading such events are neither random nor discontinuous. Rather, history unfolds in a form of continuity that Heidegger calls “destiny”

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*facts*”—I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations.” *The Will To Power*, (trs.) W. Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale, (ed.) W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968) §481, 267.

<sup>16</sup> Vattimo, “Hermeneutics and Democracy” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23.4, 1997, 5. Hereafter referred to as HD. (This essay also appears as a chapter in *Nihilism and Emancipation*; citations here are to its earlier appearance in article form.)

<sup>17</sup> In addition to Heidegger and Gadamer, Vattimo’s association of metaphysics with violence draws on the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Theodor W. Adorno. See his essay “Metaphysics, Violence, Secularisation”, (tr.) B. Spakman in *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, (ed.) Giovanna Borradori (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), and the chapter on “Ethics” in BI.



(*Geschick*) in which interpretations of the world are handed down from one generation to another. On Vattimo's interpretation, this means that while history does not unfold predictably according to any predetermined structure, pattern, or set of laws (*à la* Hegel or Marx), it does unfold in a way that gives continuity to tradition and coherence to culture. In particular, Vattimo argues that the kind of positive nihilism he advocates (metaphysical and epistemological anti-foundationalism) has developed from a line of thinkers and traditions that have been concerned precisely with the ethical problem of reducing violence. (In his latest works on religion, this tradition is linked with Christianity and its central value, charity.<sup>18</sup>) Vattimo believes it is possible for his anti-foundationalist philosophy to avoid relativism by finding criteria in the historical situation in which it unavoidably exists and the tradition out of which it developed. His nihilistic hermeneutics finds its guiding thread in the historically transmitted impetus to reduce violence, an impetus that forms an essential part of the world in which we live and the dialogical community in which we think and argue. This impetus helps constitute the conditions for dialogical agreement, which Vattimo believes are the only conditions for validity for any argument.

Despite his opposition to metaphysics, Vattimo rejects the possibility that it may be definitively overcome. He argues that such an overcoming necessarily implies a new foundation, and thus simply imposes another metaphysics. Vattimo, therefore, resists positing the nihilistic interpretation of Being as a new beginning that leaves metaphysics outside and behind. Rather, he writes that "[f]or Heidegger, as for Nietzsche, thought has no other 'object' (if we may even still use this term) than the errancy of metaphysics, recollected in an attitude which is neither a critical overcoming nor an acceptance that recovers and prolongs it." (EM 173) Vattimo appropriates Heidegger's rarely-used term *Verwindung* to explain the relationship between metaphysics and nihilism. This term suggests an alternative to overcoming (the German for which is *Überwindung*), an alternative Heidegger himself suggests in a number of places.<sup>19</sup> *Verwindung* is a complex term, difficult to translate: it can mean

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Vattimo's essay "The Age of Interpretation" in Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty, *The Future of Religion*, (ed.) Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, for Vattimo, in the first essay of Heidegger's *Identity and Difference*, (tr.) J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Heidegger also uses the

convalescence, to be cured of an illness while still bearing the traces of it, and it can mean “distortion,” from *winden* which means “to twist.” The meaning of *Verwindung* as convalescence also has the connotation of “resignation”; one can be *verwunden* to a loss or pain.<sup>20</sup> Taken together, these meanings suggest that when Heidegger speaks of *Verwindung* in relation to metaphysics, he is suggesting a twisting-free from metaphysics through a resignation to it. While this seems a paradoxical notion, Vattimo interprets the *Verwindung* of metaphysics as an acceptance of the necessity to think in the metaphysical categories that have been handed down to us, but bereft of their *most* metaphysical aspect, that is, without reference to Being as secure foundation.

Vattimo takes from his interpretation of Heidegger the lesson that we cannot step outside the metaphysical tradition, but must work within it in a *verwindend* relation to it. Insofar as nihilism dissolves foundational thought, the most violent aspect of metaphysics, it can be seen as opening up a new field of possibility, where thought and life will relinquish the nostalgic desire to hold fast to foundations. Seeking out and taking advantage of these new possibilities, Vattimo believes, is our sole opportunity for social emancipation, where such emancipation is understood as a social pluralism in which multiple voices are allowed to dialogue freely. These lines of argument that emerge from Vattimo’s reading of Heidegger, thus, give meaning to the title of the book to which I shall shortly turn, *Nihilism and Emancipation*.

### **Vattimo’s Politics: Democratic Socialism and the Problem of Globalisation**

Parallel to his academic career, Vattimo has long been actively engaged in politics. In his youth, he was involved with the Christian Democratic Party in Italy. He has since been a member of the Radical Party (*Partito Radicale*) and the Democratic Left (*Democratici di Sinistra*), and has been particularly outspoken as a “gay rights” activist, participating for a

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term in the context of a discussion of nihilism in “The Question of Being” in *Pathmarks*, (ed.) W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Vattimo’s most thorough analysis of the term *Verwindung*, on which I have drawn here, is in the chapter “Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy” in EM, 172–3. A slightly different version of this chapter was published as “*Verwindung*: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy”, (tr.) R. Palmer in *SubStance* 53, 1987, 7–17.

time in the national directorship of the Democratic Left Homosexual Movement (*Coordinamento Omosessuale DS*). From 1999–2004, Vattimo served as a Deputy of the European Parliament (Strasbourg), representing the Democratic Left Party of Italy in the Group of the Party of European Socialists. Among other parliamentary duties, he served on the Commission of Freedom and Citizen's Rights, Justice, and Home Affairs; the Commission for Culture, Youth, Education, the Media, and Sport, and the delegation for relations with South Africa.<sup>21</sup>

As is readily evident from his political associations, Vattimo has always aligned himself broadly with the Left. Interestingly, Vattimo's political trajectory resembles in broad outline other philosophers whom we might refer to as "postmodern post-Marxists," such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. These thinkers began with a broadly Marxist perspective, and hoped for the overcoming of class exploitation through revolutionary change. In his youth in the 1950s, Vattimo was deeply involved in both Catholic groups and Leftist politics, identifying as a "catto-communist." This was a position that sought to resist the totalitarian dangers of a communist state (the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia in 1948, an event which motivated strong anti-communist feelings in the Catholic Church), but nevertheless embraced the communist ideals of social justice and the labour movement. (ZI 5–6) During this period of early political radicalism Vattimo was asked to leave the Catholic Action Group because of his progressive political views, was fired from a teaching job for taking his students to a demonstration against apartheid in South Africa, and was arrested for demonstrating for the right to strike in private industrial zones. (ZI 6–7) In the 1960s, Vattimo was converted to Maoism by his reading of Herbert Marcuse. (ZI 10)

In the context of early 1970s Italy, Vattimo's political philosophy sought to mobilise Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critiques of metaphysics and humanism as a corrective to Marxian theory, which was perceived by him and others as remaining too metaphysical. Vattimo's 1974 book *Il soggetto e la maschera* was intended to be "the political-philosophical manifesto for the new democratic left." (ZI 12) In this

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<sup>21</sup> Grateful thanks are due to Geoffrey Chan, whose unpublished translations from Italian texts initially made some of this information concerning Vattimo's political biography available to the author.

work, Vattimo posits Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as a figure of revolutionary, non-alienated subjectivity, thus situating his studies of Nietzsche within the purview of a Marxian project. Like others in France and elsewhere, however, for both theoretical and historical reasons, Vattimo turned more decisively away from Marxism in the later 1970s. *Il soggetto e la maschera* had argued for a change in structures of subjectivity as well as a change in structures of power, but retained a Marxian conception of a subject of history (despite a Nietzschean radicalisation of what this meant). In the late 1970s in Italy radical politics began to embrace terrorism, and Vattimo saw that some of his students were conflating the Nietzschean revolutionary subject he had proposed with a "Leninist revolutionary subject," which embraced violence in the name of metaphysical absolutes. (ZI 12) Partly in reaction to this development, and the relation he perceived between violence and metaphysics, Vattimo developed the philosophy of weak thought through a radicalisation of his readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger. (ZI 12–3)<sup>22</sup>

Since the early 1980s, Vattimo has agreed with Jean-François Lyotard that Marxism is a defunct metanarrative.<sup>23</sup> He argues now that while the Left has always taken its inspiration from philosophies of history such as the Enlightenment, positivism, and Marxism, the contemporary political situation for the Left is defined by the dissolution of the Marxist metanarrative as well as the collapse of real socialism with the 1989 revolution in Eastern Europe. (HD 3 and 5; NE 81) Vattimo's political allegiance is not merely a historically contingent one, however; he opposes revolutionary politics, and political programs grounded in metanarratives, because of the violent potential he believes they both share. In answer to an interviewer's question, "Is it right to introduce a better order through force?", Vattimo alludes to "the horrors produced by

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<sup>22</sup> See Zabala's article (on which I have drawn extensively here) for a more extensive account of Vattimo's political history. For a brief description in English of Vattimo's position in *Il soggetto e la maschera* and the theoretical reasons that led him to abandon it, see his *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, (tr.) W. McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 229, note 9. On these themes, see also the essay "Nietzsche, the Superman, and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde" collected in the same volume.

<sup>23</sup> See HD. In fact, while Vattimo is broadly in agreement with Lyotard's thesis regarding the end of metanarratives, he is somewhat critical of the way Lyotard tries to legitimise this thesis, and attempts to formulate it in a more consistent fashion. See Vattimo's essay "The End of (Hi)Story," *Chicago Review* 35.4, 1986, 20–30. Hereafter referred to as EH.

the grand revolutionary movements, by armed and unarmed prophets,” and asserts that “a respect for what lives and has lived is the only “better” we recognise, and this excludes the use of force.”<sup>24</sup>

While revolutionary politics threatens the violence of physical force, metanarratives such as Marxism arguably threaten the violence of silencing dissenting voices, that specific form of violence Vattimo associates with metaphysical thought. Marxism may be understood as metaphysical insofar as it posits “natural” values and rights that act as a foundation for the critique of capitalism and the basis for a preferable political economy.<sup>25</sup> Such natural categories describe a supposedly objective and permanent structure of Being, and act as a foundation or ground that may serve a suppressive authority in silencing those voices which do not legitimise themselves with respect to this ground. Such a suppressive authority has, of course, manifested itself in the communist regimes of the U.S.S.R, China, and elsewhere. Given this analysis, Vattimo can view the collapse of Marxism as a dominant political philosophy and the widespread failure of communist states as an opportunity for the Left to reconstruct itself in non-metaphysical, and hence less violent, terms. For Vattimo, such a reconstruction should centre around *democracy* and *socialism*, interpreted in a way which links these two forms of political organisation with the nihilistic interpretation of Being.

Vattimo explains his allegiance to the democratic ideal in the essay “Hermeneutics and Democracy” (in *Nihilism and Emancipation*), where he associates the two ideas announced in the title on the grounds that they share a common conception of the world as a conflict of interpretations. He writes that “hermeneutics most faithfully reflects the pluralism of modern society that is best expressed, in the political realm, through democracy.” (HD 1) For Vattimo, democracy is the form of po-

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<sup>24</sup> Vattimo, “Bottles, Nets, Revolution, and the Tasks of Philosophy”, (tr.) I. Chambers, *Cultural Studies* 2.2, 1988, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Vattimo’s critical comments are directed toward the metaphysical traditions associated with the Left in general, and he does not engage in a detailed analysis of Marx or Marxism. Arguably, however, an interesting parallel to Vattimo’s concerns regarding Marxism may be found in Jean Baudrillard’s *The Mirror of Production*, (tr.) M. Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975). Baudrillard argues that while Marx criticises capitalist ideology for presenting historically contingent ideas as universal and eternal, Marx himself is guilty of the same thing in positing supposedly natural categories such as human nature (man as productive animal) and the use value of objects.

litical representation most consistent with his nihilistic ontology, since it does not base government on foundational values or a single perspective assumed to access absolute truth. In democracy—at least in its ideal form—government is the outcome of, and must take into account, the social fabric of multiple, competing interpretations.

Vattimo's defence of socialism is best approached *via* a consideration of the principal features of the current political landscape he believes must be negotiated by the contemporary Left: the rise of new fundamentalisms and the pervasiveness of capitalist "supermarket culture." (HD *passim*) Fundamentalism of all kinds (and we might note in passing that the Catholic Church has often been one of Vattimo's targets, despite his own Catholic orientation) is an obvious target for a nihilistically-oriented politics because of its unambiguously foundational aspirations. The issue of capitalism is more complex: Vattimo concedes that contemporary capitalism has the same anti-foundational traits as a nihilistic society of the free play of interpretations, but argues that it lacks the goal of the reduction of violence, a goal central to the positive form of nihilism he champions. Instead, contemporary capitalism glorifies competition and an ideology of development at any cost. Competition and development inspire and justify forms of violence and, according to Vattimo, the rules of the marketplace reduce life to a game of survival.<sup>26</sup>

The direction in which Vattimo believes a political resistance to capitalism should advance is most clearly developed in another of the essays in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, "Globalization and the Relevance of Socialism."<sup>27</sup> Here, Vattimo invokes Habermas' notion of the colonisation of the lifeworld by pure strategic rationality to describe the pervasive reduction of the social and the political spheres to the economic.<sup>28</sup> The process of globalisation, on Vattimo's analysis, is just such a reduction. He argues that "the realm of economics, of survival, is no more than a violent battlefield, unless there is mediation at a different level, the level

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<sup>26</sup> "Globalization and the Relevance of Socialism" in NE, 121. Hereafter referred to as GRS.

<sup>27</sup> This essay was first presented on the occasion of Vattimo's acceptance of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thinking, Breman, 2002. (ZI 31)

<sup>28</sup> Vattimo's use of Habermas is rather free, and a detailed analysis of his thought is not necessary for an appreciation of Vattimo's argument. For Habermas on the colonisation of the lifeworld, see *The Theory of Communicative Action*, (tr.) T. McCarthy, 2 vols (Cambridge: Polity, 1984–87).

of the political.” (GRS 121) The form of political organisation he believes can accomplish this mediation, beyond a minimal democracy, is socialism. Vattimo develops a particular understanding of socialism by beginning with Hannah Arendt’s affirmation of an “ethical” separation of politics from the sphere of private interests<sup>29</sup>, and then arguing for the further need to restore the independence of the political sphere from the economic. Restored to independent functioning, the relations between these three spheres may be mediated in such a way as to ameliorate the violent imposition of the economic sphere on the other two. The function of the *political* sphere, for Vattimo, once it is set free from encroachment by the *economic*, should be to uphold *social* interests and protect the sphere of the social from the economic. He argues that this is the central meaning of socialism, writing that

today we are able to perceive the “truth” of socialism, above all as a program for setting politics free of the laws of economics, especially the laws of the globalised economy, which, as we now see on every side, bring with them growing limits to freedom, to recognition, to the conditions for a “good life.” (GRS 129)

Translating this into the Habermasian terms on which Vattimo draws, the sphere of politics is given the role of protecting the lifeworld (the sphere of social interests) from colonisation by the strategic rationality of the economic sphere. On Vattimo’s account, the State is the minimal form of political organisation necessary to fill this protective role. For Vattimo, the State ought not have a homogenising function with respect to its citizens, but it should function to protect individuals and communities from the potentially homogenising effects of economics: ““socialism” in the sense in which I have used the term here has to mean a conception of the state as guarantor of the multiplicity of the communities that compose it...” (GRS 129) In addition to the anti-foundational and pluralist orientation of democracy, then, Vattimo advocates socialism, in this specific sense, as providing the “guiding thread of the reduction of violence” that

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<sup>29</sup> Vattimo’s use of Arendt is also rather free, and again an appreciation of his argument does not depend on a detailed analysis of her work. For Arendt on the separation of politics from private interests, see her “Public Rights and Private Interests” in *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy*, (ed.) M. Mooney and F. Stuber (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

is essential to his nihilistic philosophy. Together, democracy and socialism are seen by Vattimo as forms of political organisation that combat the violent tendencies of both fundamentalism and capitalism.

### **Nihilism in Capitalism and Technoscience**

Whatever the seeming merits of Vattimo's answer to the problem of capitalist globalisation, I now wish to argue that it runs significantly counter to his previous philosophical insights. This argument will be developed by drawing on an analogy made by Vattimo himself between two processes of "modernisation": technological science (or "technoscience"), on the one hand, and capitalism, on the other. This analogy is not uncommonly made by philosophers and social theorists, and is succinctly stated by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner as follows:

The abstraction process generated by science, in which the natural world was emptied of meaning and reduced to quantitative value, is paralleled by the abstraction process created by capitalism, in which all objects, including labour itself, are subsumed to exchange value as mediated by money. In both cases, a *reductionism* takes over placing the entire world within the frame of technological manipulation for power and profit.<sup>30</sup>

Vattimo develops this analogy by likening Marx's analysis of capitalism in terms of exchange-value to Heidegger's analysis of the essence of technology. In his book *The End of Modernity*, he suggests that both Nietzsche's formulation of nihilism in terms of the death of God and Heidegger's formulation of nihilism as the oblivion of Being can be interpreted in the terms of Marx's analysis of the dissolution of use-value in exchange-value. Vattimo writes:

When read in the light of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the accomplishment of nihilism, ... [the death of God] can be understood in terms of the generalisation of exchange-value in our society: it is that same occurrence which appeared to Marx to be still definable strictly in the moralistic terms of 'generalised prostitution'

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<sup>30</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York and London: Guilford Press, 1997), 200.



and the desacralisation of what is human.... If we follow the main thread supplied by the nexus nihilism/value, we may say that—in Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s sense of the term—nihilism is the consumption of use-value in exchange-value. (EM 26)

In the well-known essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger in effect identifies the essence of technological science as the height of nihilism (that is, the oblivion of Being in metaphysics).<sup>31</sup> In accord with his “left” reading of Heidegger and assertion of the positive potentialities of nihilism, Vattimo asserts the value of technoscience as nihilistic, rejecting the criticisms of science and technology made by many thinkers in the European philosophical tradition. This argument finds its fullest expression in chapter two of Vattimo’s book *Beyond Interpretation*, where it is placed in the context of a discussion of the hermeneutic tradition’s repeated critiques of “scientism.”<sup>32</sup> Vattimo argues that all of the major thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition, from Dilthey to Rorty, have upheld a strict distinction between the human sciences and the natural sciences and have attempted to defend the human sciences from the growing encroachment of science and technology. Hermeneutics asserts its domain as the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), the sphere of human meaning and value as opposed to scientific fact. Science is understood as a system of objective facts about the natural world, while the *Lebenswelt* is understood as a structure of shared rationality, tradition, and community.

Against the consensus of the hermeneutic tradition, Vattimo argues that there is no need for hermeneutics to defend the human sciences against “scientism” because hermeneutics and technological science share a similar “nihilistic vocation.” He writes:

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, (tr.) W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). On the relation between the essence of technology and nihilism considered as the oblivion of Being in metaphysics see, “The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead” in the same volume, and Heidegger’s “Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being” in *Nietzsche: Nihilism* (Vol. IV), (tr.) D. Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> See BI, Chapter 2, “Science”.

The relation of hermeneutics to modern techno-science breaks with all metaphysical and humanist associations when hermeneutics, taking science seriously as a determinant factor in the configuration of Being in modernity, grasps the essential nihilistic meaning of science which is at the same time constitutive of its own destiny. The world as a conflict of interpretations and nothing more is not an image of the world that has to be defended against the realism and positivism of science. It is modern science, heir and completion of metaphysics, that turns the world into a place where there are no (longer) facts, only interpretations. (BI 26)

Vattimo argues that the growth of the sphere of calculable facts has given rise, seemingly by contrast, to the recognition of the groundless and non-factual nature of the sphere of human activity and valuation. Through this process of undermining the truth-value of the *Lebenswelt*, however, the project of technoscience ends up undermining itself. Vattimo explains the reasoning behind this process as follows: If science is a human activity, then it too is just a mode of presenting interpretations, not facts. While science proceeds as a search for facts, Vattimo argues that it is ultimately as groundless as hermeneutics and the other human sciences (in support of this argument, he references well-known philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend). Vattimo, therefore, celebrates technological science as a force of positive nihilism that undermines the metaphysical claims to factual truth associated with humanistic values, and is destined to undermine its own claims to factual knowledge. Vattimo's analysis of technological science, then, follows Nietzsche's analysis of modern nihilism in which the highest values end up devaluing themselves (for example, the search for truth undermines the value of truth itself).

On the basis of this analysis, Vattimo argues that there is no need to "protect" the lifeworld from colonisation by technological science since the natural and human sciences are of the same essence (that is, nihilism). The task of hermeneutics should rather be to help science realise its nihilistic vocation. Vattimo concludes:

It is not a matter, for hermeneutics, of setting limits to scientism, of resisting the triumph of science and technology in the name of

a humanist culture, of standing up for the 'lifeworld' against calculation, planning and total organization. The critique that hermeneutics can and must move against the techno-scientific world is aimed, if anything, to aid it in a recognition of its own nihilistic meaning and to take it up as a guiding thread for judgements, choices and the orientation of individual and collective life. (BI 26)

If the above passage is read with the analogy between technoscience and capitalism in mind, the inconsistency between Vattimo's philosophical nihilism and the political program outlined in "Globalisation and the Relevance of Socialism" becomes apparent. If capitalist exchange-value and technological science both share in the same essence and vocation of nihilism, why does Vattimo celebrate the nihilism of technoscience while insisting that we must defend the social sphere of human values from the erosive forces of economics? Arguably, the politics of weak thought betrays its own insights if it conceives of the answer to the problem of globalised capitalism as a protection of humanistic social values against the nihilistic, ungrounding forces of economic value. In the next section, I wish to gesture toward a critique of capitalism more consistent with Vattimo's ontological nihilism. In doing so, I shall be reading Vattimo against himself, but in the interests of a more rigorous development of his own ideas—the very strategy he applies to thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger.

### **The *Verwindung* of Capital**

An extension of Vattimo's thought to the question of capitalist globalisation may be made on the basis of the analogy between technoscience and capitalism outlined above. Like technoscience, capitalism may be understood as having a "nihilistic vocation." Considered as the wholesale conversion of all values into exchange-value, capitalism is nihilistic insofar as it has an *ungrounding* effect: metaphysical claims to natural essences or secure foundations are swept away in the flux of absolute exchange. As Marx and Engels famously proclaimed, with the development of capi-

talism “[a]ll that’s solid melts into air...”<sup>33</sup> Capitalism, however, is still arguably a metaphysical ideology undergirded by certain remaining foundational value-claims: the ideology of “*development* at any cost,” the glorification of *competition* and, above all, the supposed pre-eminence of *economic value* over all other values. Thus, from the perspective suggested by Vattimo’s philosophy, capitalism may be seen as a metaphysical theory of human existence, one which construes human beings as essentially competitive, and the good life as dependent on economic development.

This theory of human existence, then, underlies the exaltation of economic value over all other values, giving it the function of a foundational value or absolute principle. It is this central value, along with the values of competition and development it supports, which remains metaphysical and which is arguably responsible for the violence of capitalism—its reductive, hegemonic, and homogenising tendencies. Given the still-metaphysical nature of capitalism, then, I suggest that the implications of weak thought for a critique of capitalism might be extrapolated by applying Vattimo’s preferred response to metaphysics: the concept of *Verwindung*.

The *Verwindung* of capital would be directed toward the undermining of the metaphysical nature of capital insofar as capitalism holds up a metaphysical model of economic value as a kind of well-grounded fact. In practical terms, this refers to the dominance in the contemporary world of economic value as the most important value, namely, that foundational value that is taken as a basic and unquestioned fact of human existence and flourishing. The project of a *Verwindung* of capital would be to *extend* and *deepen* the nihilism of exchange-value, “twisting” capitalism away from these metaphysical bases and toward its nihilistic potential.

The *Verwindung* of capital would involve a critique of capitalist ideology, not by positing alternative values as a more affirmative “other” to the nihilism of capitalism, but by insisting that capitalism has not yet become nihilistic *enough*. That extra step, which would push capitalism into an accomplished nihilism, would involve the recognition of capitalism as a system of political economy based on an interpretation of human

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (ed.) S. H. Beer (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 13.

existence and of politico-economic reality, one interpretation among many. Capitalism, and in particular its endorsement of the dominance of economics and the development of capital as values, would then be revealed as lacking any foundation which would give it the status of an exclusive claim to truth.

Rather than protect extra-economic values against economic exchange-value, as Vattimo seeks to do in his advocacy of the autonomy of the political and economic spheres, the *Verwindung* of capital would reduce all values to an equal footing (at least with reference to any supposedly foundational claims). This reduction would not be a simple reduction to economic value, since the very universalisation of exchange-value, taken to its extreme, undermines those ideologies that uphold economic value as the only, or primary, legitimacy. The *Verwindung* of capital would be by no means an uncritical surrender to or celebration of capitalism, but an injunction to undermine its violent, metaphysical tendencies by helping it fully realise its nihilistic vocation. The world that a *Verwindung* of capital aims toward would be a pluralistic world of competing interpretations *with* a properly nihilistic orientation, that is, guided by the aim of the reduction of violence. As Vattimo notes in “Hermeneutics and Democracy,” “...the principle of the reduction of violence...places clear limits on the glorification of competition, and on the ideology of ‘development at any cost.’” (HD 5) Thus, a *Verwindung* of capital would be a strategy that stakes its hopes on the potential for the dissolution of metaphysical absolutes in the tides of exchange-value to dissolve the values that make capitalism itself violent: competition, development, and the priority of economic value.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> While the political extension of weak thought as the *Verwindung* of capital I am suggesting here is my own construction, rather than anything which, to my knowledge, may be found in Vattimo’s writings up to this date, it is interesting to note the suggestiveness of similar themes in the early announced title of a forthcoming book co-authored by Vattimo and Santiago Zabala: *From Within. Deconstructing Capitalism through Globalisation*. (This title was announced on Santiago Zabala’s website (<http://www.santiagozabala.com/home.htm>) in 2007. Vattimo also mentions this book in the interview “A Prayer for Silence” in John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, (ed.) J. W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 109: “Santiago Zabala and I are currently at work on a book on politics, to be entitled *From Within*, in which we hope to show how socialism is what you get when one starts to criticise the inequalities of capitalism.” At the time of this writing [February 2009] the title of

### Prospects for a Politics of Weak Thought

The “reconstruction” of Vattimo’s thought I have attempted above clarifies a thematic problem faced by many postmodern post-Marxists by showing that this problem has the same structural features as the problem of overcoming metaphysics identified by Heidegger, Nietzsche and others. This thematic problem means that postmodern post-Marxists face a problem of “political reason” analogous to the more general problem of rationality that besets postmodernist discourse. To borrow a phrase from Richard Rorty, this general problem is how to chart a safe course between “the Scylla of Platonism and the Charybdis of vulgar relativism.”<sup>35</sup> As a general metaphysical and epistemological problem, this is the question of how to overcome the Platonism of metaphysical absolutes without falling into a relativism in which all truth-claims are viewed as equally valid. Translated into political terms, post-Marxists face the challenge of developing a critical relation to capitalism that avoids setting up metaphysical absolutes (such as a universal theory of human nature, or eternal ideal of the state) as a basis upon which to critique capitalism (the Scylla of Platonism), on the one hand, and to avoid losing any basis at all on which to critique capitalism (the Charybdis of vulgar relativism), on the other hand. As I have reconstructed the politics of Vattimo’s weak thought above, the concept of *Verwindung* is what attempts to accomplish this difficult passage between Scylla and Charybdis. In what follows, I will briefly indicate some of the possible successes and limits of political rationality subjected to a *Verwindung*.

Vattimo’s weak thought avoids vulgar relativism by offering a way for thought to gain direction without a secure foundation in metaphysical absolutes: thought “latches onto” the historical transmission of Being, which, in the current age of nihilism, is foundationlessness itself. For Vattimo, nihilism becomes the criterion by which judgements are made. Weak thought can, therefore, critique capitalism for not being sufficiently nihilistic, and Vattimo can assert the priority of democracy, not

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the co-authored book on politics now announced on Zabala’s website is *Hermeneutic Communism: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Politics of the Weak* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming in 2011). To what, if any, extent this work will resemble themes I have suggested here remains to be seen.

<sup>35</sup> Rorty, “Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching” in *Selected Papers from the Synergos Seminars* 2, 1982, 42.

because it is an eternal ideal of social organisation, but because it is most in tune with the pluralism of the contemporary world (our contingent historical situation). To some extent an ideal image of a pluralistic society is posited, but it is held to be only an historically specific ideal, and offered only as an interpretation. Importantly, as we have seen earlier, the form of nihilism Vattimo holds up as a criterion for evaluation is not itself simply a form of relativism. Rather, it is specifically ontological and epistemological foundationlessness, given shape and character by the ethical demand to reduce violence. Moreover, this form of nihilism devolves from history rather than being itself a metaphysical absolute. Weak thought thus posits that criteria for choosing values or making decisions are given by the historical transmission of the nihilism of the Western tradition. Weak thought enables a critique of capitalism on the grounds that its form of nihilism is not directed by the guiding thread of the reduction of violence, which Vattimo derives from his interpretation of the philosophy of history. Thus, Vattimo insists that weak thought “involves plenty of normative content, which can provide the basis for satisfying the reasonable preoccupations of people like Habermas.” (EH 30)

While nihilism, as Vattimo construes it, appears successfully to avoid vulgar relativism<sup>36</sup>, however, we might nevertheless ask whether the criteria it provides are *thick*<sup>37</sup> enough to enable justice in concrete po-

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<sup>36</sup> The question of whether or not Vattimo’s weak thought ultimately avoids the problem of relativism is, of course, one which could be debated much further and deserves far more attention than I am able to give it here. For a discussion of this issue, see Dario Antiseri, *The Weak Thought and its Strength* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), 65–7. However, weak thought does successfully avoid the simplistic criticism of postmodern political theory, which argues that any thought that eschews foundational claims falls immediately into vulgar relativism.

<sup>37</sup> As contrasted with “thin,” in the sense of these terms suggested by John Rawls and taken up by Bernard Williams and others. As glossed in Thomas Mautner’s *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, “a “thick” concept or description includes particular features and circumstances; a “thin” one is couched in general and abstract terms.” (London: Penguin, 1996), 564. As deployed in political and ethical theory, thick concepts are applied to concrete features of the world and specific situations, whereas thin ones are so general as to remain abstracted from these. See John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), §60 (where he uses the opposition

litical contexts (a reasonable demand for any politics, and one which is clearly important to Vattimo through his commitment to socialism). In other words, while Vattimo's positive conception of nihilism and its mobilisation through the concept of *Verwindung* may provide a neat solution to the relatively abstract problems of epistemology and metaphysics, is it up to the concrete demands of political praxis? While justice may, of course, be construed in many ways, I would like to show the challenge a politics of weak thought faces by confronting it once again with the problems encountered through globalisation. This will also allow a discussion of the second problem postmodern political reason must seek to avoid: the Scylla of Platonism.

One of the common criticisms of the globalisation of capitalism is that it does violence to cultural diversity. The expansion of free trade opens up potentials for the marketing, sometimes aggressive, of Western (and often American) cultural commodities in non-Western countries. There is the potential, then, for the erosion of traditional cultures and emerging local cultures by the invasion of popular Western culture. Can Vattimo's weak thought take a critical stand against cultural violence? An essential consideration here is that while weak thought sets up nihilism itself as a theory that gives thought direction and enables critique, Vattimo, following Nietzsche and Heidegger, is very clear that nihilism is the destiny of the *West*. It is Western culture, dominated by the Christian-moral interpretation of the world and its decline through the process of secularisation, which has led to the sunset of Being in the contemporary age.<sup>38</sup> Can weak thought, explicitly guided by the Western tradition, apply appropriate critical categories to other cultures? The danger here seems to be that weak thought might allow the eradication of other, non-Western cultures, because the only terms that it is capable of employing privilege a nihilism that is explicitly a Western destiny. If, through the process of trading cultural commodities, a non-Western culture finds its traditional culture being eradicated, it seems that weak thought could only affirm this process as a nihilistic destruction of metaphysical, all-too-metaphysical, values.

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thin/full), and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993 [1985]).

<sup>38</sup> See Vattimo's "Toward an Ontology of Decline", (tr.) B. Spakman in *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, (ed.) G. Borradori (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 63.



The problems that weak thought encounters in making judgments about the values of non-Western cultures is well exemplified by Vattimo's statements on the Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwah* against Salman Rushdie, issued in 1989 after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. In an article entitled "Our Savage Brother," Vattimo declares that "the...sentence of Khomeini against Rushdie...is not the voice of a different kind of culture, it is merely the expression of a backwardness which we can reasonably hope to overcome by means of a correct work of secularisation." He continues by giving a paradoxically ambiguous privilege to the West precisely because it is the culture of secularisation and the weakening of values and claims to truth. He writes, "...we cannot but declare that the way of humanisation passes through the West, through this secularised civilization, unbelieving and blasphemous, which fortunately no longer has any strong values to be asserted even by violence and has no prophets nor ayatollahs who have to be respected even on pain of death."<sup>39</sup> In the case of the clash of cultures, Vattimo seems to reject cultural relativism, and upholds the nihilism of the West as the very basis by which we may make judgments about other cultures. In simple terms, cultures and traditions which betray strong claims to metaphysical truth, may be criticised on this basis. This difficulty may well present a problem for the capacity of weak thought to take a critical stance against the cultural violence that globalised capitalism threatens.

Nevertheless, Vattimo's political stances show a commitment to tolerance for non-Western cultures and religions. For example, despite his own Christianity and his assertion that Christian traditions have suffused Western culture to the extent that it is impossible to be a non-Christian philosopher, he opposed the explicit mention of Christian values in the constitution of the European Union. His argument here was the somewhat paradoxical one that Christianity itself supports tolerance and secularisation, and that explicit mention of Christian values would be exclusionary (and thus, not an appropriate enactment of those same values). Similarly, he disapproved the banning of Muslim headscarves in schools in France, again insisting on the importance of cultural and religious tolerance. (ZI 28) So, it appears that Vattimo's nihilistic West becomes a kind of foundationless foundation for valuation; it paradoxically refers

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<sup>39</sup> *La Stampa*, 18 February 1989. Quoted in Antiseri, *Weak Thought and Its Strength*, 69-70.

all standard of judgement to the Western tradition, but this tradition insists on the reduction of violence and on cultural and religious tolerance.

Nevertheless, we may reasonably ask whether a political position that refers to the superiority of Western values—even in a weakened form—is able to be an ethical and just one in a world of real cultural diversity. The position of the West as the “stirrer” of the cultural melting pot is one that has been vigorously criticised from various perspectives<sup>40</sup> (some of which may be broadly characterised as postcolonial theory and critical race theory), and it remains a vexed question whether Vattimo’s Western nihilism can enable a true multiculturalism or whether it aids an agenda of Westernising the world. Insofar as his philosophy of weak thought justifies itself with reference to specifically Western values, it seems that a “weak politics” still risks steering too close to the Scylla of Platonism; not in the sense of endorsing metaphysical absolutes as such, but of endorsing a Eurocentric viewpoint that risks a failure to place limits on cultural violence. As such, the capacity of a politics of weak thought construed as a *Verwindung* of capital to uphold justice in the face of the cultural violence threatened by globalisation appears questionable. On the one hand, weak thought appears to steer too close to the Charybdis of vulgar relativism because its normative content may be too thin to protect against the cultural violence of globalisation, while, on the other hand, it steers too close to the Scylla of Platonism by upholding the cultural privilege of the West.

What I have attempted here is to explore the relationship between Vattimo’s philosophy and politics, and in particular to spell out the possible implications for the extension of Vattimo’s weak thought to the critique of capitalism. This extension, as I have constructed it here, is justified by the analogy that may be made between technoscience and capital. My foregoing comments should be understood as a preliminary analysis and, as Vattimo himself is often wont to do, I must indicate that while I have tried to suggest some of the strengths and limitations of weak thought for the analysis of political economy, the details of this analysis would require far more working through and debate if they are to be done justice.

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 1998).

What I have tried to show here, however, is that the politics of weak thought appears to betray its own insights if it conceives of the answer to the problem of globalised capitalism as a protection of the life-world of human values from the nihilistic, ungrounding forces of economics. However, I have also suggested that a more rigorous extension of the logic of weak thought into politics, as a *Verwindung* of capital, faces the vexed problem of avoiding both Platonism and relativism, and that on both sides it is not clear that such a politics of weak thought can adequately resist the cultural violence threatened by globalisation. It may well be the case, then, that Vattimo's own political program of upholding the autonomy of the political from the economic on a governmental level is a necessary one in the political sphere. If so, what remains to be determined is how such a political program can be made consistent with Vattimo's philosophical framework, namely, the ontology of weak thought.

*ashleydw@unimelb.edu.au*