

The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi

Part 3: History, Philosophy and Mythology

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We are posting today the concluding part of a series on the life and work of twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The first part was posted on April 3. The second part was posted yesterday, April 4.

Prior to a discussion of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger it seems necessary to dispose of a possible objection. This objection can be expressed as follows: if it is true that the thought reflects the man, and if the man is known to be morally and politically reprehensible, then the thinking behind the man must be equally reprehensible. If that is the case, then we are in a position to render judgment on someone's thinking without actually reading what he wrote. When stated in this way, the absurdity of this mode of thinking becomes self-evident. The problem with this type of reasoning is that it takes what is a partial truth, that indeed a thinker does in some way reflect the man and his times, and transforms this insight one-sidedly into an absolute dictum such that it becomes as false as it is true. In general, the relation between a thinker and his action is far too complex to be summed up in a well-phrased maxim.

At the same time, we must reject the opposite, equally one-sided judgment, one that has been championed by Heidegger apologists, that there is no relation between a thinker and his politics. The proponents of this viewpoint often bring up the example of Gottlob Frege, a vicious anti-Semite whose politics apparently had no bearing on his technical work on logic. Yet even if one concedes that there are cases—particularly in technical areas removed from political and sociological concern—where theoretical work can be pursued unrelated to a person's biography or social status, it does not follow that such a dichotomy is present in the work of any particular theorist. It would be particularly surprising to find a discordance between the political activity of a man such as Heidegger and his theorizing, knowing that his theorizing was itself intimately concerned with personal and political activity.

Were we to follow either of these false paths in relation to Heidegger, we may feel vindicated in our judgment of the man and his politics, but we would miss an opportunity to learn something about how his philosophy influenced or was in turn influenced by his politics. In particular we would be negligent in our responsibility to account for a most remarkable phenomena of *fin-de-siecle* bourgeois thought—namely, how is it that a philosopher who has been called by many the greatest thinker of the twentieth century was in fact a Nazi? What does this conjuncture say about the kind of philosophy practiced by Heidegger and his followers? Most important of all, what does this say about the state of cultured opinion at the dawn of the new millennium?

As an alternative to the pious banalities of those who would characterize Heidegger as an innocent who "fell into error," we will briefly survey the history of thought with which Heidegger was engaged. In doing so it will

become clear that Heidegger was neither naïve nor error-prone but, as he himself had admitted, that his conversion to Hitlerism expressed the deepest principles of his thought.

Broadly speaking, Heidegger appears within the framework of the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Philosophically, both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution had its most profound expression in the work of George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel. Hegel sought to overcome what he viewed as the one-sidedness of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution while at the same time defending their work as historically necessary for the emergence of modern bourgeois society. Marx follows Hegel as a defender of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Marx however also recognized that the ideals of the French Revolution—liberty, equality and fraternity—are incompatible with a society based on private property. Henceforth these ideals could only be realized through the struggle for socialism.

The year 1848 saw revolutionary movements break out throughout Europe. The working class took its first steps as an independent political force. This had profound reverberations among all strata of society. Following the events of 1848, the philosophical reaction against Enlightenment rationality becomes more conscious of its aims. If the original opposition to the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century came from the monarchists, landholders and the church, the nineteenth century saw a new wave of opposition to the legacy of the Enlightenment emanating from those forces who felt most threatened by the emerging bourgeois society. They looked back longingly to a mythical golden age in a medieval past.

In Germany especially where the bourgeoisie had still to establish its political hegemony, the birth of political Romanticism found resonance among the peasantry and the middle class, which felt most threatened by the democratic revolutions that began to challenge the old order in the Europe of the 1840s. This played into the hands of the dukes, princes and landholders who had no desire to share political power. In 1841, 10 years after Hegel's death, the Prussian authorities brought in his former roommate and philosophical nemesis, Friedrich Schelling, to lecture in Berlin.

With Schelling's later philosophy we can say that the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment found its first philosophical voice. Schelling sought to replace the Enlightenment's concern with reason, political freedom and social equality with a rejection of reason in favor of revelation and elitist values. Schelling's later system consecrated an appeal to myth and authority.

Consequent on the defeat of the 1848 revolution, the anti-rationalist tendencies expressed in the later philosophy of Schelling found fertile ground. The promise of the French Revolution, which seemed to

inaugurate a new era in human history, was transformed into the nightmare of Prussian reaction. Instead of celebrating new possibilities, the prevailing spirit was one of resignation to a very narrowly circumscribed avenue of political practice. The notion of freedom was redefined subjectively, as an inner state that can be maintained despite the vicissitudes of political life. This was combined with a deep pessimism toward the ability of human agents to create a more humane society. The name of Arthur Schopenhauer will forever be linked to this strand of subjective idealism.

There was a fundamental change in social conditions after 1848. Whereas political Romanticism maintained a hostility to capitalism prior to 1848, following the turmoil of that year, which saw the working class rise as an independent political force for the first time, the political thrust of Romanticism, particularly in Germany, was turned against the working class. All that remained of the anti-capitalist impulse of the earlier period of Romanticism was a cultural critique of bourgeois mediocrity.

Aristocratic and elitist values were championed as a safeguard against the threat of the great leveling out of society introduced by democratic and socialist impulses. Needless to say a palpable fear of the working class was exponentially heightened following the events of the Paris Commune in 1871, in which the working class for the first time briefly took power in its own hands. The mood of the German petty bourgeois immediately following the defeat of the Paris Commune was captured in a letter written by Nietzsche:

"Hope is possible again! Our German mission isn't over yet! I'm in better spirit than ever, for not yet everything has capitulated to Franco-Jewish leveling and 'elegance', and to the greedy instincts of *Jetztzeit* ('now-time').... Over and above the war between nations, that international hydra which suddenly raised its fearsome heads has alarmed us by heralding quite different battles to come." [1]

Nietzsche in particular plays a key role in our narrative for it is with him that the Enlightenment project is literally turned on its head. Nietzsche appropriates the Enlightenment's own critical weapon and turns it against the Enlightenment. He begins by unmasking the relations of power lurking behind claims to truth, a technique that was developed by the Enlightenment in its struggle against religious superstition, and turns this against the Enlightenment itself. He concludes that all truth claims amount to nothing more than exercises of the "will to power." He reinterprets the entire history of thought as an expression of a hidden will to power.

According to this account, for the past two millennia we have witnessed the "will to power" of Christianity guiding the fate of European culture. Nietzsche despised the egalitarian movements for democratic reforms and socialism that emerged in his time. He saw these modern political and social movements as threatening the aristocratic values for which great civilizations and great people (the overman) should strive. He indicts Christianity, which he sees as imbued with a "slave morality" for setting into motion a process which culminates in the Enlightenment's final unmasking of religious beliefs, an event he called "the death of god." The Enlightenment ushers in an age in which values can no longer be grounded, an age of nihilism.

It is in Nietzsche that the counter-Enlightenment finds its real voice. And it is to this tradition that we should look in situating the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger himself in fact recognized Nietzsche quite correctly as a kindred spirit. But whereas Nietzsche saw himself as the prophet announcing the coming of nihilism, Heidegger sees himself as the biographer of a mature nihilism. Heidegger's views were formed in the deeply pessimistic atmosphere engendered by Germany's defeat in World War I. He was influenced by the right-wing author Ernest Juenger, whose novels celebrated the steadfast, resolute soldier meeting his fate in battle. Another important influence was Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, a hysterical rant against socialism and liberalism, which are indicted for corrupting the values of Western civilization.

The immediate philosophical tradition from which Heidegger graduated was inaugurated by Wilhelm Dilthey in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The trend launched by Dilthey has come to be known as *Lebensphilosophie* (Philosophy of Life or Vitalism). Its practitioners include such disparate thinkers as George Simmel, Oswald Spengler, Max Scheler and Karl Jaspers, as well as the fascists Ludwig Klages, Alfred Baeumler and Ernst Krieck.

Lebensphilosophie was not so much a specific philosophical doctrine as a certain cultural mood that affected broad areas of the intelligentsia. It is characterized by a sharp dichotomy between science and technology on one side, versus the category of "Life" on the other. For its ideological armaments *Lebensphilosophie* borrowed the critique of scientific understanding from the debates that were raging prior to 1848. Scientific understanding, thought of as narrow and barren, was contrasted to "Experience" which gives us an intuitive access to "Life." This appeal to immediate intuition which gradually becomes more pronounced is what brands *Lebensphilosophie* as a form of irrationalism.

In his most important work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger sets out for himself the heroic task of retrieving the history of metaphysics. Specifically, Heidegger maintains that modern man has forgotten the meaning of the question of Being. He says that in using the common word "is" we no longer know what we mean. According to Heidegger, the subject-predicate logic which we use every day conceals the true meaning of what existence really is. Heidegger claims that the Greeks had an authentic experience of Being as "unconcealment." But when Greek philosophy was translated into Latin, it lost the richness of this primal experience. The experience of Being was reified into a relation between a thing and its properties. Heidegger sees his task as the retrieval of the original meaning of Being which has been lost. From this vantage point he goes to war against the entire history of Western philosophy following the Greeks.

The echoes of Nietzsche are here evident and they will become even more obvious in Heidegger's later philosophy. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger turns away from the history of philosophy which he views as hopelessly compromised by a flawed model of knowledge. His method of practicing philosophy also retraces the steps of Nietzsche. He abandons discursive argumentation that try to convince an unbiased reader by the force of their logic in favor of prophetic pronouncements and etymological sleight-of-hand that aim at overpowering the reader.

In his later philosophy, Heidegger will go even farther in his repudiation of the history of philosophy. He will claim that all philosophers after the pre-Socratics have been guilty of falsifying and concealing some kind of primal experience of Being. His program for retrieving the original meaning of Being becomes transformed into a project aimed at the "destruction of metaphysics."

Being and Time is preoccupied with a discussion of the meaning of death. According to Heidegger, it is the imminence of death and our knowledge of it that makes an "authentic" life possible. It is only when we live life at the extreme, and confront our own mortality, that we are able to set aside the inauthentic chatter of our day to day existence and come to terms with our true selves. This theme, which Heidegger called our Being-towards-Death, is by no means new in the history of thought. It is closely related to the meditations of scores of religious writers from St. Augustine to Kierkegaard to Tolstoy.

Perhaps more to the point, however, Heidegger's secularized meditation on the imminence of death and the responsibilities that devolve to us as a result owe more to the heroic literature of Ernest Juenger. It is the soldier above all who is called upon to make a decision that will validate his life as he faces imminent death. Heidegger's category of "resoluteness," which becomes so important to existential philosophy, is rooted in the situation of the soldier facing the enemy in the trenches in a hopeless struggle.

Many commentators have remarked that this feature of Heidegger's

thinking, his emphasis on the need to make critical decisions determining one's fate, illustrates the essentially apolitical quality of Heidegger's philosophy. Seemingly, one can choose to be either a Nazi, as Heidegger himself did, or a member of the French resistance, as Sartre did, and still remain faithful to the terms of an authentic existence. The completely empty character of the categories of authenticity and resoluteness have been the subject of much criticism. Habermas, for instance, characterized it as "the decisionism of empty resoluteness." [2] Heidegger is taken to task for lacking a criteria by which to judge the worth of one decision against another. Given the accepted interpretation of Heidegger, this criticism is correct as far as it goes. However, a remarkable book that has just been published promises to turn upside down the body of received opinion on the philosophy of Heidegger.

In his path-breaking work, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time*, Johannes Fritzsche demonstrates that not only are the categories discussed in *Being and Time* not apolitical, but on the contrary, "When one reads *Sein und Zeit* in its context, one sees that, as Scheler put it, in the *kairos* [crisis] of the twenties *Sein und Zeit* was a highly political and ethical work, that it belonged to the revolutionary Right, and that it contained an argument for the most radical group on the revolutionary Right, namely, the National Socialists." [3]

Fritzsche's point is that Heidegger's idiom and use of language were part of a shared tradition of right-wing thought that emerged in the 1920s in Germany. The political content of *Being and Time* would have been clear to Heidegger's German contemporaries. However, to readers of the French and English translations that circulated a generation or two later, this political content is completely obscured. Instead as Fritzsche mockingly puts it, "You see in *Being and Time* the terrifying face of the old witch of the loneliness of the isolated bourgeois subjects, or the un-erotic groupings in their *Gesellschaft* [society], and you see the desire for a leap out of the *Gesellschaft*." [4]

Sartre and the French existentialists adopted from Heidegger the themes of loneliness and alienation as well as the corollary notion of a heroic and resolute voluntarism in the face of an absurd world. Fritzsche maintains that whatever the merits of their own works, the existentialists misunderstood Heidegger. Fritzsche's argument for reading Heidegger as the philosopher of National Socialism is impossible to summarize here. It relies on a very sophisticated historical and philological analysis of the text of *Being and Time*. After reconstructing the actual content of *Being and Time*, Fritzsche compares it with the writings of two other notorious right-wing authors who were contemporaries, namely Max Scheler and Adolf Hitler. Fritzsche demonstrates that the political content of *Being and Time* and *Mein Kampf* are identical, notwithstanding the fact that the first book was written by a world renowned philosopher and the second by a sociopath from the gutters of Vienna.

One of the myths Fritzsche exposes is that Heidegger's notion of authenticity bears some relationship to the traditional conception of individual freedom. Fritzsche demonstrates that for Heidegger achieving "authenticity" means precisely the opposite of exercising freedom. Rather it means that one answers a "call" to live life according to one's fate. The fate whose call one must answer has been preordained by forces that are outside the scope of the individual. Answering the call is therefore the very anti-thesis of any notion of freedom. In support of this thesis, Fritzsche quotes the following passage from *Being and Time*:

"*Dasein* [Heidegger's term for human being] can be reached by the blows of fate only because in the depths of its Being *Dasein* is fate in the sense we have described. Existing fatefully in the resoluteness which hands itself down, *Dasein* has been disclosed as Being-in-the-world both for the 'fortunate' circumstances which 'comes its way' and for the cruelty of accidents. Fate does not arise from the clashing together of events and circumstances. Even one who is irresolute gets driven about by these—more so than one who has chosen; and yet he can 'have' no

fate." [5]

Fritzsche comments on this passage as follows:

"First, far from being something a *Dasein* creates or changes or breaks, 'fate' exists prior to the *Dasein* and demands the latter's subjugation. The point is not how to create or break fate [which would be a typical existentialist interpretation. A.S.]. Rather, the problem is whether a *Dasein* accepts, opens itself for, hands itself down to, subjugates itself to, or sacrifices itself to fate—which is what authentic *Dasein* does—or whether a *Dasein* denies fate and continues trying to evade it—which is what ordinary, and therefore inauthentic *Dasein* does." [6]

Nor is the fate to which authentic *Dasein* must subjugate itself some sort of existential angst. For Heidegger, fate had a definite political content. The fate of the patriotic German was identified with the *Volksgemeinschaft*, a term that was used polemically by the Nazis to denote a community of the people bound by race and heritage. The idea of a *Volksgemeinschaft* was, in the right-wing literature of the time, often counterposed to that of *Gesellschaft*, a reference to the Enlightenment notion of a shared community of interests based on universal human values. Continuing his analysis of authenticity, Fritzsche comments:

"In contrast to ordinary *Dasein* and inauthentic *Dasein*, authentic *Dasein* ...realizes that there is a dangerous situation, and relates itself to the 'heritage.' In so doing, it produces the separation between the *Daseine* that have fate and those that do not, i.e., the inauthentic *Daseine*. In the next step authentic *Dasein* realizes that its heritage and destiny is the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which calls it into struggle.... After this, authentic *Dasein* hands itself down to the *Volksgemeinschaft* and recognizes what is at stake in the struggle.... Finally, authentic *Dasein* reaffirms its subjugation to the past to the *Volksgemeinschaft* and begins the struggle, that is, the cancellation of the world of inauthentic *Dasein*." [7]

In characterizing the struggle for authentic *Dasein* as "a cancellation of the world of the inauthentic *Dasein*," Fritzsche is being overly metaphorical. In plain language, "the cancellation of the world of inauthentic *Dasein*" is a reference to the fascist counterrevolution. It entails the destruction of bourgeois democracy and its institutions, the persecution and murder of socialists, the emasculation of all independent working class organizations, a concerted and systematic attack on the culture of the Enlightenment, and of course the persecution and eventual elimination of alien forces in the midst of the *Volk*, most notably the Jews.

If Fritzsche's interpretation of *Being and Time* is correct, then it can likewise serve to demystify the riddle of the relationship between Heidegger's early philosophy and his later conversion to a peculiar form of quietism. Many commentators have been puzzled at the seemingly radical transition from a philosophy based on activism, as the typical interpretation of *Being and Time* saw it, to one rooted in the mystical resignation to one's fate that characterizes Heidegger's later philosophy. Fritzsche has shown, however, that the early philosophy was anything but voluntarist. The notion of man transforming his destiny in accordance with his will is a typical Enlightenment motif that bears little resemblance to Heidegger's vision. Rather, as Fritzsche has demonstrated, we do not so much transform our destiny as find what it is and submit to it. Thus, the sense of resignation is already there in the early philosophy. The transition therefore in the later philosophy is hardly as radical as it has appeared.

We can add that there is nothing particularly unique in Heidegger's theory of authenticity as answering the call of one's fate. A strikingly parallel conception can be found in the work of another contemporary intellectual who evinced sympathy for Nazism, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Lecturing in 1935, Jung provides the following account of the relation between individual volition and our collective fate:

"Our personal psychology is just a thin skin, a ripple upon the ocean of collective psychology. The powerful factor, the factor which changes our whole life, which changes the surface of our known world, which makes history, is collective psychology, and collective psychology moves

according to laws entirely different from those of our consciousness. The archetypes are the great decisive forces, they bring about the real events, and not our personal reasoning and practical intellect.... Sure enough, the archetypal images decide the fate of man. Man's unconscious psychology decides and not what we think and talk in the brain-chamber up in the attic." [8]

If we substitute Jung's vocabulary, grounded in his mythological appropriation of psychology, with Heidegger's philosophical categories, we will find an essential congruence in the thought of Jung and Heidegger. For instance, if "authentic Dasein" stands in for "man's unconscious psychology" we will have reconstructed another expression of Heidegger's argument that fate is neither created nor transformed by the conscious activities of men. Rather fate is a pre-existing state, an archetype in Jung's terminology, whose "call" on some unconscious level, one is compelled to "answer" or risk the consequences of inauthenticity.

The affinity between Heidegger's thinking and Jung's should not be interpreted as a case of cross-pollination between philosophy and psychology. Rather, what it does demonstrate is a shared outlook deriving from a common ideological source. This common substratum is the *Volkisch* ideology that had been gestating in Germany for a century prior to the development of Nazism. Whereas the philosophers of the counter-Enlightenment paved the way for *Volkisch* ideology, an eclectic assortment of ideologues were its actual authors. From the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment, to Nietzsche's pronouncement that nihilism is the culmination of Reason, the belief in progress and the perfectibility of mankind through science and social evolution was successively undermined. These moods resonated among those social forces that found themselves increasingly displaced and marginalized by the industrialization of Germany in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The rise of *Volkisch* ideology expressed the fears of peasants, artisans and landowners squeezed between the pincer movements of the bourgeoisie and the working class.

Ideologies emerge not only from the official philosophical schools, but are also generated through an "underground" whose leading representatives are often barely noticed by later historians. Heinrich Riehl (1823-97), a man who left no trace in any history of philosophy text, was a seminal theorist of *Volkisch* ideology. His book *Land und Leute* [*Places and People*] argued that the inner character of a people is completely intertwined with their particular native landscape. Central to Riehl's thinking and to *Volkisch* ideology thereafter is the concept that certain classes or ethnic groups have an organic relationship to the land and are thus "rooted" whereas others are "rootless" and cannot be assimilated to the *Volk*. The historian George L. Mosse in his definitive history of *Volkisch* ideology, provides a summary of this aspect of Riehl's ideas:

"Yet for Riehl a third class, dangerous to the body politic and unfit to be accommodated within *Volkisch* society, had come into being. This group, identified as true 'proletariat,' consisted of the totally disinherited ...

"What precluded the integration of the proletariat into the system of estates was its instability, its restlessness. This group was a part of the contemporary population which could never sink roots of any permanence. In its ranks was the migratory worker, who lacking native residence, could not call any landscape his own. There was also the journalist, the polemicist, the iconoclast who opposed ancient custom, advocated man-made panaceas, and excited the people to revolt against the genuine and established order. Above all there was the Jew, who by his very nature was restless. Although the Jew belonged to a *Volk*, it occupied no specific territory and was consequently doomed to rootlessness. These elements of the population dominated the large cities, which they had erected, according to Riehl, in their own image to represent their particular landscape. However, this was an artificial domain, and in contrast to serene rootedness, everything it contained, including the inhabitants, was in continuous motion. The big city and the

proletariat seemed to fuse into an ominous colossus which was endangering the realm of the *Volk* ..." [9]

Jung, having been philosophically predisposed towards *Volkisch* mythology, expressed sympathy with Nazism in the immediate period after 1933. Unlike Heidegger, however, Jung did not answer the "call" and never joined the Nazis. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that this unflattering period of Jung's biography, like that of Heidegger's, although known for decades, has only recently become the subject of critical scholarship. [10]

It is not too difficult to see how the themes of "rootedness" and "rootlessness" appear in *Being and Time* as "authenticity" and "inauthenticity." The *Volkisch* strands in Heidegger's thought combined with the irrationalist heritage of Nietzsche to produce an eloquent statement of the social position of the petty bourgeois in the period between the two world wars. In his study of the genesis of irrationalist philosophy George Lukacs diagnosed the social psychology of the time that created such an opening for Heidegger's conceptualization:

"Thus Heidegger's despair had two facets: on the one hand, the remorseless baring of the individual's inner nothingness in the imperialistic crisis; on the other—and because the social grounds for this nothingness were being fetishistically transformed into something timeless and anti-social—the feeling to which it gave rise could very easily turn into a desperate revolutionary activity. It is certainly no accident that Hitler's propaganda continually appealed to despair. Among the working masses, admittedly, the despair was occasioned by their socio-economic situation. Among the intelligentsia, however, that mood of nihilism and despair from whose subjective truth Heidegger proceeded, which he conceptualized, clarified philosophically and canonized as authentic, created a basis favourable to the efficacy of Hitlerian agitation." [11]

Thus far, we have identified two strands in Heidegger's thinking that form part of a common substance with German fascism: philosophical irrationalism and the appropriation of *Volkisch* mythology. A third ideological building block of German fascism was the pseudo-science of racial theory rooted in a crude biological determinism. To be sure, Heidegger's thought never accommodated this brand of crude racialism. For one thing, the philosophical traditions from which biological racial theory derives, Social Darwinism and mechanistic reductionism, were anathema to the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* from which Heidegger emerges. *Lebensphilosophie*, particularly in the hands of its later practitioners, stressed the difference between Life and the natural sciences. With Heidegger, it develops a distinctly anti-scientific animus. One might say that Heidegger's animosity toward science precluded any consideration of racialist pseudo-science.

Some of Heidegger's apologists have suggested that because Heidegger was opposed to biologism he therefore could not have been a Nazi or an anti-Semite. If we follow this line of thinking, we would be attributing entirely too much significance to the role of biological racial theory for Nazism. As Tom Rockmore has pointed out,

"Yet the antibiologism which Heidegger shared with many other intellectuals is compatible with anti-Semitism and Nazism. Biologism was not as important to Nazism, at least until well after National Socialism came to power, as the traditional anti-Semitism strikingly present in, for instance, Luther's works and even in speeches before the German Reichstag, or parliament." [12]

We may add that Heidegger was not above collaborating in common projects with the vilest of the Nazi racists, despite his rejection of their crude philosophy. Whatever philosophical differences Heidegger may have had with Alfred Rosenberg, he was more than willing to attend international conferences as a representative of the Third Reich and sit on the same dais with Rosenberg and his ilk. [13]

One can add the observation made by Lukacs, that official National Socialist "philosophy" could never have gained a mass audience without

years of irrationalist culture paving the way.

“But for a ‘philosophy’ with so little foundation or coherence, so profoundly unscientific and coarsely dilettantish to become prevalent, what were needed were a specific philosophical mood, a disintegration of confidence in understanding and reason, the destruction of human faith in progress, and credulity towards irrationalism, myth and mysticism.”[14]

Perhaps then Heidegger's biggest crime was not his enlistment in the Nazi Party and assumption of the rectorship of Freiburg. These were merely political crimes, of the sort committed by many thousands of yes-men. Perhaps his crime against philosophy is more fundamental. Through it he contributed in no small degree to the culture of barbarism that nourished the Nazi beast.

Danse Macabre: Heidegger, Pragmatism and Postmodernism

“This conceit which understands how to belittle every truth, in order to turn back into itself and gloat over its own understanding, which knows how to dissolve every thought and always find the same barren Ego instead of any content—this is a satisfaction which we must leave to itself, for it flees the universal, and seeks only to be for itself.”[15]

One of the most curious philosophical trends in the postwar period has been the embrace of Heidegger by many left-leaning intellectuals. This is an extraordinarily complex subject to which we can hardly do justice in the scope of this presentation. We wish simply to sketch the epistemological kinship, despite the historical differences, between Heidegger and his contemporary sympathizers.

What has characterized the postwar intelligentsia in the West has been the wholesale abandonment of any identification with Marxism, humanism or any vestige of Enlightenment rationality. The hopes of a generation of radical intellectuals were trampled underneath the weight of the failed revolutionary movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It would be hard to underestimate the impact on the French intelligentsia in particular of the failure of the revolutionary upsurge of May-June 1968. Legions of former left intellectuals began a wholesale retreat from the Enlightenment vision of an emancipatory rationality. Their spirit of despair was summed up by the late Jean-Francois Lyotard, the founder of postmodernism:

“We can observe and establish a kind of decline in the confidence that for two centuries, the West invested in the principle of a general progress of humanity. This idea of a possible, probable, or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge and freedoms would benefit humanity as a whole ...

“There is a sort of grief in the *Zeitgeist*. It can find expression in reactive, even reactionary, attitudes or in utopias—but not in a positive orientation that would open up a new perspective.”[16]

Lyotard's personal history exemplifies the political and intellectual transformation of an entire generation of radicals. In the 1950s and 1960s he was on the editorial board of the radical journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. He was an active participant in the events of May 1968. Following the restabilization of the Gaullist regime after 1968, Lyotard turned against Marxism, which he characterized, along with the Enlightenment notion of progress, as a “failed metanarrative.”

Holding the attempt to encompass in thought the terrible recent history of our time a failure, it was not a very big step for the postmodernists to appropriate the irrationalist tradition that turned its back on the Enlightenment. This is where the Heideggerians, postmodernists, deconstructionists and neo-pragmatists find a common ground. All these trends reject what they call the traditional conceptual thinking, “Philosophy” or “Science” with capital letters.

Why did these disparate philosophical traditions gravitate to Heidegger's notion of a “thinking that is more rigorous than the conceptual”?[17]

They saw in Heidegger the intellectual apparatus that would take them beyond the now suspect model of rationality that has been the hallmark of Western philosophy for 2,500 years. Heidegger provided the anti-

foundationalist approach of Derrida, Rorty and others with a systematic critique of the history of philosophy. The postmodernists, deconstructionists and pragmatists solemnly accepted Heidegger's diagnosis of the terminal state of Western thought when he said, “What is needed in the present world crisis is less philosophy, but more attentiveness in thinking; less literature, but more cultivation of the letter.”[18]

The neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty comes to the identical conclusion when he writes:

“If Philosophy disappears, something will have been lost which was central to Western intellectual life—just as something central was lost when religious intuitions were weeded out from among intellectually respectable candidates for Philosophical articulation. But the Enlightenment thought, rightly, that what would succeed religion would be better. The pragmatist is betting that what succeeds the ‘scientific,’ positivist culture which the Enlightenment produced will be better.”[19]

In a remarkable confession, Rorty himself explains the underlying sociological imperative that has produced this sea-change in Western thought. In describing the malaise that has passed over Western thought Rorty writes:

“It reflects the sociopolitical pessimism which has afflicted European and American intellectuals ever since we tacitly gave up on socialism without becoming any fonder of capitalism—ever since Marx ceased to present an alternative to Nietzsche and Heidegger. This pessimism, which sometimes calls itself ‘postmodernism,’ has produced a conviction that the hopes for greater freedom and equality which mark the recent history of the West were somehow deeply self-deceptive.”[20]

We thus witness the peculiar intellectual partnership between the post 1968 generation of disappointed ex-radicals with the ideas of the German radical right of the 1920s. The warm reception for Derrida and French postmodernism in the United States can be explained by a series of developments in the past three decades that in many ways parallels the experiences of the French intelligentsia. We have in mind the disillusionment that occurred when the heady days of protest politics of the 1960s and early 1970s gave way to the constricted cultural and political landscape of the Reagan administration.

Yet, what is the content of the new “thinking” about which Heidegger, Derrida and Rorty speculate? We will look in vain in the works of Heidegger, Rorty, Lyotard or Derrida for an explanation of what this new “thinking” is and how it is “better” than a thinking grounded in an attempt to conceptualize an objective world. At best, we are told to look at the work of poets and other artists whose intuitive aesthetic view of the world is offered as a new paradigm of knowledge. This explains the later Heidegger's abandonment of the traditional philosophical issues in favor of musings on the poetry of Hölderlin. We can discern a similar trend in the works of the postmodernists and neo-pragmatists. Derrida for instance has sought to redefine the philosophical enterprise as a form of literary text. Rorty champions the “good-natured” novelists at the expense of the sickly philosophers.[21]

Heidegger's claim to point to a primordial “thinking” that is in some way a return to a more authentic, uncorrupted insight is hardly new in the history of philosophy. It is but a variation of the claim that immediate intuition provides a surer basis for knowledge than the mediated sequence of concepts that brings particulars into relation with universals. The attempt to grasp the bare particular, uncorrupted by the universal, whether conceived of as “sense perception” or a mystical access to the divine, has dogged philosophy for centuries. In his own time, Hegel had to respond to the intuitionists who opposed critical thought. Replying to these thinkers, he wrote, “what is called the unutterable is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant [but is not actually expressed].”[22]

This comment, it seems to us, makes a perfect coda to Heidegger's “thinking” that is beyond philosophy. Heidegger's “thinking” is not post-

philosophic but pre-philosophic. We have not so much overcome the history of metaphysics, as we have regressed to a period in the history of thought prior to the emergence of metaphysics, prior to the differentiation of science from myth and religion.

The pomposity and pretentiousness of Heidegger's return to the archaic was magnificently punctured by one of Heidegger's earliest and most trenchant critics, Theodore Adorno. Adorno highlighted the hidden assumption in Heidegger's thought, "the identification of the archaic with the genuine." Continuing this thought he wrote:

"But the triviality of the simple is not, as Heidegger would like it to be, attributable to the value-blindness of thought that has lost being. Such triviality comes from thinking that is supposedly in tune with being and reveals itself as something supremely noble. Such triviality is the sign of that classifying thought, even in the simplest word, from which Heidegger pretends that he has escaped: namely, abstraction." [23]

What practical results ensue from this kind of "thinking"? The non-mediated perception leads one back to the "familiar." The "familiar" is that which we take for granted as being self-evidently true. It is the realm of historically ingrained assumptions and class biases, those axioms of everyday life that are accepted by one's friends and colleagues that make up the realm of the "familiar." The intuitionist is thereby a slave to the historically rooted ideologies of his place and time, all the while thinking that he has overcome all dogmas and prejudices. For Heidegger, the "familiar" is heavily invested with the ideological stance of the Radical right, its shared mythology of a *Volk* having a common destiny, the betrayal of the fatherland by the liberals and socialists, etc. For the contemporary crop of postmodernists and neo-pragmatists, it is possible to delineate a common set of beliefs that are considered today's intellectual coin of the realm. Among these one could mention the following:

Rational discourse is incapable of encompassing the complexities and nuances of (post)modern society. (The fact that such a statement is itself an example of rational discourse and is therefore self-refuting does not seem to bother proponents of this view.)

The notion of progress cannot be demonstrated in history. This is closely related to a deep sense of skepticism about the possibility of harnessing technology for the benefit of humanity.

The working class cannot play a revolutionary role. Some postmodernists counterpose other forces to the working class. Others simply despair of any possibility of a revolutionary transformation of society. Others even deny the existence of the working class in contemporary society.

All, however, are united in their conviction that the prospect for socialism is precluded in our time. It follows that Marxism is conceived as a hopeless Utopian dream. This last conviction is uncritically adopted by all shades of postmodernism, deconstruction and neo-pragmatism. It has the force of a new dogma, one that remains completely unrecognized by its proponents.

Let us be clear. The defenders of Heidegger today are not, with a few notable exceptions such as Ernst Nolte, supporters of fascism. What they see in Heidegger is his attack on the history of rational thought. Like Heidegger, they wish to return to a mythical past prior to the corrupting influence of Western metaphysics. The politics of the "primordial thinkers," those who would in Hegel's words, "flee the universal," invariably leads to a politics that elevates the immediate and fragmentary at the expense of the objective and universal interests of humanity.

It is not accidental that the postmodernists have become supporters of various forms of "identity politics," grounded in subjectively conceived particularistic interests, such as gender or ethnic group or even neighborhood. They oppose any notion of a politics based on universal and objective class interests. This is but a variation of Heidegger's political position of the 1920s and 1930s in which the reality of the mythical *Volksgemeinschaft* became the chief principle around which

political positions were formulated.

Finally, we wish to ask once more why has Heidegger been considered by many the greatest philosopher of this century? We can certainly elucidate some reasons why philosophers and others who have no sympathy for fascism, find his work compelling. His work does evince a deep familiarity with the history of philosophy and its problems. He also develops a very novel interpretation of this history. At bottom, the content of his thought is neither profound nor original. Judgments of this sort are not, however, based on the content of Heidegger's philosophy. They arise from the perceived lack of an alternative to the spirit of nihilism that pervades our age. Heidegger more than anyone else in the twentieth century gave voice to that spirit.

It is a spirit whose presence must be banished. The other of nihilism, the spirit of hope and equality ushered in by the Enlightenment, is Marxism. We wish to conclude with the words of the German Marxist, Walter Benjamin, himself a victim of the Nazis. Commenting on Ernst Jünger's book celebrating the fascist aesthetic, *War and Warriors*, he wrote the following, at a time (1930) when the fascist threat began to cast a very dark shadow:

"Until Germany has exploded the entanglement of such Medusa-like beliefs ...it cannot hope for a future. ...Instead, all the light that language and reason still afford should be focused upon that 'primal experience' from whose barren gloom this mysticism of the death of the world crawls forth on its thousand unsightly conceptual feet. The war that this light exposes is as little the 'eternal' one which these new Germans now worship as it is the 'final' war that the pacifists carry on about. In reality, that war is only this: the one, fearful, last chance to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationships they possess to nature through their technology. If this corrective effort fails, millions of human bodies will indeed inevitably be chopped to pieces and chewed up by iron and gas. But even the habits of the chthonic forces of terror, who carry their volumes of Klages in their packs, will not learn one-tenth of what nature promises its less idly curious but more sober children, who possess in technology not a fetish of doom but a key to happiness." [24]

Notes:

1. Nietzsche to Baron von Gersdorff, June, 21, 1871, cited in George Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason*. Humanities Press, 1981, p. 325
2. Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. F Lawrence, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978, p. 141
3. Johannes Fritzsche, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time*, University of California Press, 1999, p. xv
4. Johannes Fritzsche, pp. 218-19.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 436
6. Johannes Fritzsche, p. 65
7. Johannes Fritzsche, p. 67
8. C.G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*, New York, Vintage Books, 1970, p. 183
9. George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, New York, Grosset and Dunlop, 1964, p. 22
10. Jung's affinity for Volkisch mythology and anti-semitism is documented by Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994
11. George Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason*, Humanities Press, 1981, p. 504
12. Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy*, p. 111
13. Heidegger's former student and friend, Karl Löwith met him while at a conference in Rome in 1936. Löwith, a Jew by birth, had gone into exile after 1933. On the occasion of their meeting, Löwith asked Heidegger how he could sit at the same table "with an individual like Julius Streicher." Streicher, the notorious editor of *Der Stürmer*, was admitted as

a member of the board of the Nietzsche Archive. Heidegger was a fellow board member. Löwith, in his memoirs, reports that Heidegger's response to his question about Streicher was to "dismiss the rantings of the Gauletier of Franconia as political pornography." He insisted, however, on dissociating the Führer, Adolf Hitler, from Streicher. [Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, Basic Books, 1993, p. 268]

14. Lukacs, p. 416

15. Hegel, 52, paragraph 80

16. "Notes on the Meaning of 'Post'," Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodernism a Reader*, edited by Thomas Docherty, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 48-49

17. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", *Basic Writings*, edit. David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 235

18. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", *Basic Writings*, p. 242

19. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. xxxviii

20. Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens", *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 67

21. "The important thing about novelists as compared with theoreticians is that they are good at details", Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens, p. 81

22. Hegel, 66, paragraph 109

23. Theodore W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 51

24. Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism", *Selected Writings: Vol II.*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 320-21



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