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Introduction to "Martin Heidegger and Politics: A Dossier"

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# *Martin Heidegger and Politics: A Dossier*

## *Introduction\**

by Richard Wolin

The ensuing dossier on the question of “Martin Heidegger and Politics” seeks, through a variety of means, to shed light on a debate largely sparked by the appearance in France of Victor Farias’s book, *Heidegger et le Nazisme* (Editions Verdier, 1987). However, it would be all too easy to miss the real stakes of this debate — a constructive re-examination of Heidegger’s philosophical outlook as it relates to his specific political decision of the early 1930s — by narrowly focusing on the various merits and demerits of Farias’s book itself. This is precisely the strategy of dissemblance the French Heideggerians have pursued.<sup>1</sup> They challenged the legitimacy of Farias’s inquiry in order to avoid coming to grips with the fact that 1) not only was their mentor an advocate of the National Socialist Revolution in a fashion well nigh *plus royaliste que le roi* (the *roi* in this case being Hitler), 2) but that this very “decision” for National Socialism emanated from innermost premises of his philosophy of existence itself.

In this regard, it would be difficult to discover testimony more compelling than that of the German philosopher Karl Löwith (1897-1973),

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1. See, for example, the articles by Pierre Aubenque, Henri Crétella, and François Fedier in *Le Debat* 48, [January-February, 1988].

a former student and intimate of Martin Heidegger, heretofore best known in the English-speaking world for his studies of modern historical consciousness (*Meaning in History, Max Weber and Karl Marx*), as well as his classical work on 19th-century German intellectual history, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*. Löwith's 1928 *Habilitationsschrift, Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*, was directed by Heidegger. He was a "Dozent" or lecturer at Marburg University until Hitler's accession to power in 1933. Thereafter, he was forced to embark on a long and circuitous course of emigration. He went first to Italy, then spent four years in Japan, and finally arrived in the U.S. in 1941, where he took up a position at the Hartford Theological Seminary. After teaching at the New School for Social Research for two years (1949-1951), he accepted a chair in philosophy at Heidelberg University.

The two texts by Löwith reprinted below (neither has appeared in English to date) have a common, if somewhat unusual origin. Both were originally written in Japan in 1939 as part of an competition sponsored by Harvard's Widener Library. The competition was for German emigres who were to submit essays, not exceeding 20,000 words, with the title "My Life in Germany before and after 1933." Given his precarious financial circumstances at the time, the \$500 first prize (then the equivalent of nearly half a year's salary) undoubtedly seemed attractive. Of course, Löwith did not receive the prize. His fascinating philosophical-autobiographical jottings (which were undoubtedly too substantial for the tastes of the American prize committee) were rediscovered by his widow and only published in 1986 under the same title as the essay competition *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933* (Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart).

The singularity of Löwith's reflections on "The Political Implications of Martin Heidegger's Existentialism" derives not only from the fact that he was thoroughly familiar with Heidegger's thought, but also a witness to the political events — the various stages of Germany's "National Revolution" — he describes. As such, he offers a first hand account of the transmutation of Heidegger's seemingly apolitical fundamental ontology of *Sein und Zeit* into a philosophical justification for the National Socialist Revolution — Heidegger's "private National Socialism." But Löwith is in no way out to settle old scores. His indebtedness to Heidegger's philosophical tutelage is fully acknowledged at the outset. Nor is he interested in a facile dismissal of Heidegger's greatness as a thinker on the basis of the philosopher's conviction that

there existed profound elective affinities between his own “analytic of *Dasein*” and Nazi political practices. Instead, with admirable forthrightness and clarity, he seeks to account for a seminal and perplexing issue in the intellectual history of the 20th century: what were the internal bases in Heidegger’s thought that led the philosopher to become a diehard spokesman and advocate of Nazi policies during the years 1933-1934?

In addition to the more theoretical text, Löwith’s revealing account of his last meeting with Heidegger, outside of Rome, in 1936 is included below. Löwith’s vignette proves to be of more than just anecdotal value — for example, his account of Heidegger’s own dogged and unabashed insistence, upon being confronted with Karl Barth’s opinion to the contrary, on the integral relation between his own thought and National Socialist doctrines.

Lest there be any residual doubt as to the extent and profundity of Heidegger’s Nazi convictions in the 1930s in the post-Farias era, a representative number of Heidegger’s political texts from this period, some written for newspapers, others delivered orally, are reproduced at the beginning of this dossier. Fifty years later, the thematic and rhetorical baseness of these documents continues to shock and revulse. The realization that they come from the pen of the man who, according to received wisdom, is the greatest philosopher the century, only seems to add to our dismay and confusion in re-reading them. It is not only the extent to which Heidegger accepted the National Socialist idiom of the day that is so striking, but the fact that his efforts to reconcile Nazi rhetoric with existential categories drawn from his great work of 1927 proceeds so seamlessly. The philosopher’s own emphasis on categories such as “Decision,” “Resolve,” “Fate,” “Authenticity,” and “*Dasein*” in the speeches seems perfectly of a piece with the National Socialist emphasis on “Leaders” and “Followers,” “Will,” “[German] Destiny,” “Heroism,” etc. (Any reader interested in further exploring the connection between philosophy and politics in Heidegger’s work is urged to consult the — rather anodyne — English translation of Heidegger’s 1933 *Rektoratsrede*.<sup>2</sup>)

Over the years, Heidegger’s champions have used two other strategies in their efforts to minimize the implications of their mentor’s odious

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2 Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Affirmation of the German University,” *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1985): 467ff; the German version, “Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität,” was republished by Klostermann Verlag in 1983.

political leanings. They have either claimed that Heidegger's Nazi allegiances were extremely short-lived, ending with his resignation from the rectorship in 1934; or that Heidegger the empirical individual was admittedly an unsavory sort, but his egregious political activities stand in no essential relation to his philosophy itself (a conclusion which has become especially fashionable of late). Nicolas Tertulian's meticulous analysis of Heidegger's lecture courses from the 1930s and 1940s — many of which have only recently appeared in print (in the *Gesamtausgabe*) for the first time — makes such claims untenable.<sup>3</sup> Tertulian has shown that on untold occasions, Heidegger peppered his lecture courses in those years with positive allusions to the contemporary political situation, continuing to laud the goals and achievements of the Nazism as late as the mid-1940s. That Heidegger's blind and unrelenting devotion to the Nazi cause continued beyond a point (the mid-1940s and Stalingrad) at which all reason and justice would seemingly have dictated otherwise, demonstrates a woefully myopic failure to understand the true nature of the contemporary world-political situation. As late as 1943, Heidegger could lament the fact that "the world stands in flames," while persisting in the belief that "world-historical consciousness" can only "come from the Germans" if they can manage to "find and preserve 'Germanness'." And — as late as 1944! — he retained the conviction that Germany remains "the 'divine heart of Western nations'." There is apparently no awareness that Germany has been the cause of the world-conflagration resulting in untold millions of deaths, rather than its solution.

The evidence suggests that Heidegger's historical-political myopia follows directly from the ontological categories he employed to understand the world. Indeed, it is precisely his abstract, metaphysical preoccupation with the "history of Being" (*Seinsgeschichte*) that prevents him from coming to a realistic assessment of what had gone wrong with the German *Sonderweg*. It is the mentality of Heideggerian metaphysics itself which leads him to his fanatical condemnations of "Americanism" (as well as "liberalism," "publicity," and "technique"); to his conviction, expressed in the Nietzsche lectures, that the fall of France in 1940 is explicable as a result of that nation's never having outgrown the philosophical framework of Cartesianism. Conversely,

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<sup>3</sup> See Nicolas Tertulian, "Heidegger — oder: die Bestätigung der Politik durch Seinsgeschichte," *Frankfurter Rundschau* 2 February 1988: 11. The article originally appeared in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 499 (16-31 December, 1987).

the German victory can presumably be linked to the fact that East of the Rhine, "thinking about of Being" had recently been rediscovered. Or as Heidegger himself expressed it, in Germany "a new humanity is on the rise . . . [which is] thoroughly adequate to the unique essence of modern technology;" a species of humanity which "surpasses previous humanity." It was Nietzsche who had first discovered the necessity of this "new human type," and Heidegger cites him approvingly as follows: "Only the *Übermensch* is adequate to the unlimited 'machine-economy,' and vice versa: the former is in need of the latter to establish unconditional domination over the earth."<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing and other, similar statements, not to mention the philosopher's nefarious activities as "Rector-Führer" of Freiburg University, it might be precipitate to claim that Martin Heidegger has forfeited his position of preeminence among the world's philosophers. At the same time, those who wish to claim that Heidegger's espousal of National Socialism had "nothing to do with his philosophy" had best cease emulating the dissembling tactics of their mentor and fully acknowledge the deficiencies of the categorical scheme which, in Heidegger's case, facilitated a this-worldly debacle.

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4. Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a. M.: V. Klostermann, 1983) 48: 205. In the version of the Nietzsche lectures published in 1961 (Pfullingen: Neske Verlag), Heidegger rewrote the lines cited above to make them appear to be Nietzsche's view rather than his own by adding the phrase: "In the sense of Nietzsche's metaphysics . . ." at the beginning. It is the "re-worked version" that also appears in the english translation: Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Vol. 4 ("Nihilism") ed., David F. Krell, trans., F. A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 117.