

AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS

Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger

Introduction

Existentialism collapses in the moment when its political theory is realized. The total-authoritarian state which it yearned for gives the lie to all its truths. Existentialism accompanies its collapse with a self-abasement that is unique in intellectual history; it carries out its own history as a satyr-play to the end. It began philosophically as a great debate with Western rationalism and idealism, in order to redeem the historical concretion of individual existence for this intellectual heritage. And it ends philosophically with the radical denial of its own origins; the struggle against reason drives it blindly into the arms of the reigning powers. In their service and protection it betrays that great philosophy which it once celebrated as the pinnacle of Western thinking.

Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian State"
(1934)

The full story of Marcuse's relation to Heidegger has yet to be written.

We know that during the four years Marcuse was in Freiburg studying with Heidegger, his enthusiasm for Heidegger's philosophy was unreserved. Or as Marcuse himself would observe in retrospect, "I must say frankly that during this time, let's say from 1928 to 1932, there were relatively few reservations and relatively few criticisms on my part."¹ From this period stem Marcuse's first essays—"Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," "On Concrete Philosophy," "The Foundations of Historical Materialism," "On the Philosophical

Herbert Marcuse's letters to Martin Heidegger were published by *Pflasterstrand* 279/280: 465-480, 1988. Heidegger's letter to Marcuse is in the Herbert Marcuse Archive, Stadtsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main.

Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics," and "On the Problem of Dialectic"—which attempt to effectuate a synthesis between Marxism and existentialism.² Of course, the synthesis Marcuse was seeking is suggestive of the analogous philosophical enterprise undertaken by the late Sartre in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and other works. Yet, whereas Marcuse was moving from Marxism to existentialism, Sartre's intellectual development followed the obverse trajectory. However, via the integration of Marxism and existentialism, both thinkers were pursuing a common end: they recognized that the crisis of Marxist thought—and practice—was in no small measure precipitated by its incapacity to conceptualize the problem of the "individual." And thus, in the doctrines of orthodox Marxism, the standpoint of the individual threatened to be crushed amid the weight of objective historical determinants and conditions. For Sartre, writing in the wake of Stalinism and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, a "critique of dialectical reason"—in the Kantian sense of establishing transcendental limits or boundaries—had become an urgent historical task. Marcuse's attempts to integrate these two traditions—which he would ultimately judge as failed—seemed to anticipate many of the historical problems of Marxism that would motivate Sartre's later philosophical explorations of these themes.

In Marx's 1846 "Theses on Feuerbach" he remarks that "the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively." In contradistinction to materialism, Marx continues, it fell to "idealism" to develop the "*active side*" of dialectics, i.e., that side that points in the direction of praxis: "revolutionary, 'practical-critical,' activity."³ It is not hard to see that what Marcuse valorized above all about Heidegger's early philosophy was its potential contribution to the "active side" of dialectics in a way that paralleled the contribution made by German idealism to historical materialism in the previous century. If the "crisis of historical materialism" (in "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," Marcuse alludes to "the bungled revolutionary situations" of which recent history had provided ample evidence) had been caused by the triumph of Marxism's "objectivistic" self-understanding, would not a new infusion of historically ade-

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quate idealist categories aid greatly in the resuscitation of a senescent Marxist theory?

In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács observes that “[German] classical philosophy is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the very end—on the plane of philosophy. It is able—in thought—to complete the evolution of class. And—in thought—it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind’s development can at least be seen as a problem.”⁴ In similar fashion, Marcuse perceives Heideggerian *Existenzphilosophie* to be the most advanced expression of contemporary bourgeois philosophy. However, its value is greater than being simply a “privileged” object of “ideology criticism.” Instead, it has something specific and positive to contribute to materialist dialectics, in a way that parallels Lukács’ own praise of idealism for having provided dialectical thought with the category of “mediation.” And thus, in his “Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” Marcuse lauds Heidegger’s *Being and Time* “as a turning point in the history of philosophy—the point where bourgeois philosophy transcends itself from within and opens the way to a new, ‘concrete’ science.”⁵

A more detailed account of what it was about Heidegger’s existentialism that Marcuse viewed as so promising has been provided elsewhere.⁶ In the context at hand, it will hopefully suffice to highlight the two essential “moments” of Marcuse’s appreciation of Heidegger’s thought.

First, Marcuse emphasizes what might be referred to as the “hermeneutical point of departure” (“*Ansatz*”) of *Being and Time*; i.e., the fact that human Being or Dasein occupies center stage in Heidegger’s “existential analytic” (conversely, Marcuse shows very little interest in the strictly “metaphysical” or “ontological” dimension of *Being and Time*, i.e., Heidegger’s posing of the *Seinsfrage*). He reveres this philosophical approach as an *Aufhebung* of the static, quasi-positivistic aspects of bourgeois philosophy and social science, whereby humanity is viewed predominantly as an object of scientific scrutiny and control, rather than as an active and conscious agent of change and historical becoming. By identifying Dasein as “care,” as an “embodied subjectivity”—as “that Being for which its very Being is an issue for it”—Heidegger’s thought displays a potential for the constructive transcendence of the traditional (bourgeois) philosophical antinomy between thought and being, *res cog-*

itans and *res extensa*, and—ultimately—theory and practice. By rejecting the objectivistic framework of previous philosophical thought, Heideggerian “Dasein encounters the objective world as a world of meaning oriented toward existence. It does not encounter it as a rigid *res extensa*, as independent, abstract physical things. Rather, they are related to an *Existenz* that uses them, orients itself towards them, and deals with them; thus ascribing to them meaning, time, and place.”⁷ By employing a practically situated Dasein as its philosophical point of departure, Heidegger’s standpoint in effect emphasizes *the primacy of practical reason*; and in this respect, his discussions of the problems of “Selfhood” and “my ownmost capacity-for-Being” present a micro-philosophical complement to the socio-historical analyses of Marxism.

But of equal importance in Marcuse’s youthful appreciation of Heidegger is the category of *historicity*; i.e., Heidegger’s contention in Division II of *Being and Time* that not only does all “life” exist *in history* (this is the claim, e.g., of Dilthey’s “historicism”), but that “existence” itself is *historical*: that is, Dasein is engaged in a constant and active re-appropriation and shaping of the pre-given semantic potentials of historical life. Dasein is thereby always surpassing itself in the direction of the future. Or as Heidegger expresses it, “*The primary meaning of existentiality is in the future.*”⁸ It is clear that in this “active,” “future-oriented” disposition of existential historicity, Marcuse perceives a crucial hermeneutical-methodological tool whereby the problems of historical struggle and contestation might be thematized; problems that Marxism in its current, “objectivistic,” “diamat” guise remained incapable of addressing. Or as Marcuse himself observes, “Past, present, and future are existential characteristics, and thus render possible fundamental phenomena such as understanding, concern, and determination. This opens the way for the demonstration of historicity as a fundamental existential determination—which we regard as the decisive point in Heidegger’s phenomenology.”⁹ Moreover, by virtue of the centrality of the category of “historicity” in *Being and Time*, there seemed to exist a necessary and essential basis for the marriage of Marxism and phenomenology that Marcuse was preoccupied with during these years.¹⁰

Marcuse’s efforts to merge Marxism and existentialism would be repeated by many others in the course of the twentieth century. Here, in addition to Sartre, the names of Merleau-Ponty, Enzo Paci, Karel Kosik, Pierre Aldo Rovatti, and Tran Duc Thao also come to mind.¹¹ Yet,

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according to Marcuse's own retrospective appraisal, such attempts to combine Marxism and existentialism were predestined to failure. This was true insofar as existentialist categories such as "Dasein," "historicity," and "authenticity" were, in Marcuse's view, a priori capable of attaining only a "pseudo-concreteness." Marcuse describes his reasons for breaking with the paradigm of phenomenological Marxism in a 1974 interview in the following terms: "I soon realized that Heidegger's concreteness was to a great extent a phony, a false concreteness, and that in fact his philosophy was just as abstract and just as removed from reality, even avoiding reality, as the philosophies which at that time had dominated German universities, namely a rather dry brand of neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, neo-Idealism, but also positivism." He continues, "If you look at [Heidegger's] principle concepts . . . *Dasein*, *Das Man*, *Sein*, *Seiendes*, *Existenz*, they are 'bad' abstracts in the sense that they are not conceptual vehicles to comprehend the real concreteness in the apparent one. They lead away."¹²

In his essay, "Existential Ontology and Historical Materialism in the Work of Herbert Marcuse," Alfred Schmidt, echoing Marcuse's own sentiments, similarly emphasizes the inner conceptual grounds on which the marriage between Marxism and existentialism foundered. Schmidt seconds the verdict of the philosopher and former Heidegger student Karl Löwith concerning the inadequacies of the category of "historicity": viz., that Heidegger's "reduction of history to historicity is miles away from concrete historical thought"; and in this way, Heidegger in point of fact "falls behind Dilthey's treatment of the problem: for 'insofar as he radicalizes it, [he] thereby eliminates.'"¹³

The "pseudo-concreteness" of Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie*—and thus the betrayal of its original phenomenological promise—to which Schmidt and Löwith allude, may be explained in the following terms. *Being and Time* operates with a conceptual distinction between "ontological" ("existential") and "ontic" ("existentiell") planes of analysis. The former level refers to fundamental structures of human Being-in-the-world whose specification seems to be the main goal of Heidegger's 1927 work. The latter dimension refers to the concrete, "factual" actualization of the "existential" categories on the plane of everyday life-practice. It is this level that exists beyond the purview of "existential analysis" or "fundamental ontology" properly so-called. Yet, if this is the case, then the dimension of ontic life or everyday concretion would

seem to fall beneath the threshold of Heidegger's ontological vision. And consequently, his category of "historicity" would never be capable of accounting for the events of "real history." The dilemma is further compounded by the fact that Heidegger's existential analytic treats "everydayness" as such—and thus the sphere of "ontic life" in its entirety—as a manifestation of "inauthenticity." For to all intents and purposes, it has been "colonized" by the "They" (*das Man*).

But whatever the inner, conceptual grounds may have been for the breakdown of Marcuse's project of an "existential Marxism," the immediate cause for its dissolution seemed to owe more to the force of objective historical circumstances: Hitler's accession to power on January 30, 1933, followed by Heidegger's enthusiastic proclamation of support for the regime four months later.¹⁴ In retrospect, Marcuse insists that during his stay in Freiburg, he never remotely suspected Heidegger of even covertly harboring pro-Nazi sentiments. Thus, the philosopher's "conversion" to the National Socialist cause in the spring of 1933 took him—as well as many others—by complete surprise. Nevertheless, Marcuse goes on to insist that had he at the time been slightly more attentive to the latent political semantics of *Being and Time* and other works, he might have been spared this later shock. As he explains:

Now, from personal experience I can tell you that neither in his lectures, nor in his seminars, nor personally, was there ever any hint of [Heidegger's] sympathies for Nazism. . . . So his openly declared Nazism came as a complete surprise to us. From that point on, of course, we asked ourselves the question: did we overlook indications and anticipations in *Being and Time* and the related writings? And we made one interesting observation, *ex-post* (and I want to stress that, *ex-post*, it is easy to make this observation). If you look at his view of human existence, of Being-in-the-world, you will find a highly repressive, highly oppressive interpretation. I have just today gone again through the table of contents of *Being and Time* and had a look at the main categories in which he sees the essential characteristics of existence or Dasein. I can just read them to you and you will see what I mean: "Idle talk, curiosity, ambiguity, falling and Being-thrown, concern, Being-toward-death, anxiety, dread, boredom," and so on. Now this gives a picture which plays well on the fears and frustrations of men and women in a repressive society—a joyless existence: overshadowed by death and anxiety; human material for the authoritarian personality.¹⁵

Yet, in our opening citation from the 1934 essay, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian State," Marcuse expresses a slightly

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different sentiment: viz., that in its partisanship for Nazism, *Existenzphilosophie* does not so much realize its “inner truth”; rather, it engages in a “radical denial of its own origins”: i.e., its claim to being the legitimate heir of the Western philosophical tradition.

The 1947–48 exchange of letters between Marcuse and Heidegger shows Marcuse grappling with a seemingly inexplicable dilemma: how could Heidegger, who claimed to be the philosophical inheritor of the legacy of Western philosophy, place his thinking in the service of a political movement that embodied the *absolute negation* of everything that legacy stood for? Moreover, as becomes clear from the letters themselves, Marcuse’s ties to Heidegger were not only intellectual, but also personal: he revered Heidegger not only as a thinker, but also as the teacher who had had the most significant impact on Marcuse’s own intellectual development. His attachments remained strong enough to motivate the visit to Heidegger’s Todtnauberg ski hut earlier in 1947. Moreover, we see that against the advice of his fellow German-Jewish emigrés (presumably, the other members of the Institute for Social Research), he continued, even after the disappointing discussion with Heidegger in Todtnauberg—like the poet Paul Celan (see his poem “Todtnauberg”), Marcuse, too, journeyed to Heidegger’s Black Forest retreat in search of a “single word” of repentance, which the philosopher refused to grant—to send a “care package” to Heidegger at a time when the conditions of life in Germany remained tenuous; for this much he still owed “the man from whom I learned philosophy from 1928–1932.”

As Marcuse explains in the 1974 interview, after this exchange of letters, all communication between the two men was broken off. And yet, if one turns to *One-Dimensional Man*, one finds Marcuse citing Heidegger’s arguments from “The Question Concerning Technology” in support of Marcuse’s own critique of instrumental reason (“Modern man takes the entirety of Being as raw material for production and subjects the entirety of the object-world to the sweep and order of production [*Herstellen*]”).¹⁶

Turning now to Heidegger’s letter of January 20, 1948: one finds there the familiar series of rationalizations, half-truths, and untruths that have recently been exposed in the books by Victor Farias and Hugo Ott.¹⁷ But one also finds recourse to a strategy of denial and relativization that would become a commonplace in the Federal Republic during the “latency period” of the Adenauer years: the claim that the world

operates with a double standard in its condemnation of German war crimes, since those of the Allies were equally horrible (Dresden, the expulsion of the Germans residing in the "eastern territories," etc.). To his credit, here Marcuse refuses to allow the "philosopher of Being" to have the last word.

Notes

1. "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview with Herbert Marcuse," in Robert Pippin et al., eds., *Herbert Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).
2. English translations of these essays are as follows: "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," *Telos* 4:3–34, 1969 (caveat emptor: this is an extremely poor translation); "The Foundations of Historical Materialism," in Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics," *Telos* 16:9–37, Summer 1973; "On the Problem of Dialectic," *Telos* 27:12–39, Spring 1976. See also "Über konkrete Philosophie," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 62:111–128, 1929.
3. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 121.
4. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 121.
5. Marcuse, "Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," p. 12.
6. Cf. Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 38ff.; Barry Katz, *Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation* (London: New Left Books, 1982), pp. 58ff.
7. Marcuse, "Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," p. 13.
8. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 374.
9. Marcuse, "Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," p. 15.
10. In Marcuse's failed *Habilitationsschrift*, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, the Heideggerian category of historicity also occupies center stage. There is some dispute in the secondary literature as to whether Heidegger ever read (let alone rejected) the work, or whether Marcuse—aware of the difficulties he would be faced with pursuing a teaching career amid the changing political climate in Germany—ever bothered to submit the work to his mentor. For a discussion of this issue, see Seyla Benhabib, "Translator's Introduction" to *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), pp. x–xii. For another discussion of the relation of Marcuse to Heidegger

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as it emerges in this 1932 work, see Robert Pippin, "Marcuse on Hegel and Historicity," *The Philosophical Forum* XVI(3):180–206, 1985. As opposed to other commentators who argue for a distinct break between the 1932 *Habilitationsschrift* and his next book on Hegel—the 1941 *Reason and Revolution*—Pippin seeks to emphasize the elements of continuity between the two works.

11. For a survey of these tendencies, see Paul Piccone, "Phenomenological Marxism," *Telos* 9:3–31, Fall 1971.

12. Marcuse, "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview," pp. 96–97.

13. Alfred Schmidt, "Existential Ontology and Historical Materialism in the Work of Herbert Marcuse," in Pippin et al., eds., *Herbert Marcuse*, pp. 49–50.

14. See Heidegger's Rectoral Address of May 27, 1933, *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität/Das Rektorat 1933–34: Tatsachen und Gedanken* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983); reprinted in this volume as "The Self-Assertion of the German University."

15. Marcuse, "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview," p. 99.

16. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 153–154.

17. Victor Farias, *Heidegger et la nazisme* (Lagrasse: Editions Verdier, 1987) (an English translation of Farias' book has recently been published by Temple University Press); Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1988).

Letter from Marcuse to Heidegger of August 28, 1947

4609 Chevy Chase Blvd.
Washington 15, D.C.

Lieber Herr Heidegger,

I have thought for a long time about what you told me during my visit to Todtnauberg, and I would like to write to you about it quite openly.

You told me that you fully dissociated yourself from the Nazi regime as of 1934, and that you were observed by the Gestapo. I will not doubt your word. But the fact remains that in 1933 you identified yourself so strongly with the regime that today in the eyes of many you are considered as one of its strongest intellectual proponents. Your own speeches, writings, and treatises from this period are proof thereof. You have never publicly retracted them—not even after 1945. You have never publicly explained that you have arrived at judgments other than those which you expressed in 1933–34 and articulated in your writings. You remained in Germany after 1934, although you could have found a position abroad practically anywhere. You never publicly denounced

any of the actions or ideologies of the regime. Because of these circumstances you are still today identified with the Nazi regime. Many of us have long awaited a statement from you, a statement that would clearly and finally free you from such identification, a statement that honestly expresses your current attitude about the events that have occurred. But you have never uttered such a statement—at least it has never emerged from the private sphere. I—and very many others—have admired you as a philosopher; from you we have learned an infinite amount. But we cannot make the separation between Heidegger the philosopher and Heidegger the man, for it contradicts your own philosophy. A philosopher can be deceived regarding political matters; in which case he will openly acknowledge his error. But he cannot be deceived about a regime that has killed millions of Jews—merely because they were Jews—that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite. A regime that in every respect imaginable was the deadly caricature of the Western tradition that you yourself so forcefully explicated and justified. And if that regime was not the caricature of that tradition but its actual culmination—in this case, too, there could be no deception, for then you would have to indict and disavow this entire tradition.

Is this really the way you would like to be remembered in the history of ideas? Every attempt to combat this cosmic misunderstanding founders on the generally shared resistance to taking seriously a Nazi ideology. Common sense (also among intellectuals), which bears witness to such resistance, refuses to view you as a philosopher, because philosophy and Nazism are irreconcilable. In this conviction common sense is justified. Once again: you (and we) can only combat the identification of your person and your work with Nazism (and thereby the dissolution of your philosophy) if you make a public avowal of your changed views.

This week I will send off a package to you. My friends have recommended strongly against it and have accused me of helping a man who identified with a regime that sent millions of my co-religionists to the gas chambers (in order to forestall misunderstandings, I would like to observe that I was not only an anti-Nazi because I was a Jew, but also would have been one from the very beginning on political, social, and intellectual grounds, even had I been “100 percent Aryan”). Nothing can counter this argument. I excuse myself in the eyes of my own

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conscience, by saying that I am sending a package to a man from whom I learned philosophy from 1928 to 1932. I am myself aware that that is a poor excuse. The philosopher of 1933–34 cannot be completely different than the one prior to 1933; all the less so, insofar as you expressed and grounded your enthusiastic justification of the Nazi state in philosophical terms.

Letter from Heidegger to Marcuse of January 20, 1948

Lieber Herr Marcuse,

I received the package mentioned in your letter of August 28. I believe that I am acting in accordance with your wishes and in a way that will reassure your friends if I allow its entire contents to be distributed among former students who were neither in the Party nor had any association whatsoever with National Socialism. I thank you for your help also on their behalf.

If I may infer from your letter that you are seriously concerned with [reaching] a correct judgment about my work and person, then your letter shows me precisely how difficult it is to converse with persons who have not been living in Germany since 1933 and who judge the beginning of the National Socialist movement from its end.

Regarding the main points of your letter, I would like to say the following:

1. Concerning 1933: I expected from National Socialism a spiritual renewal of life in its entirety, a reconciliation of social antagonisms and a deliverance of Western Dasein from the dangers of communism. These convictions were expressed in my Rectoral Address (have you read this *in its entirety?*), in a lecture on “The Essence of Science” and in two speeches to students of [Freiburg] University. There was also an election appeal of approximately 25–30 lines, published in the [Freiburg] student newspaper. Today I regard a few of the sentences as misleading [*Entgleisung*].

2. In 1934 I recognized my political error and resigned my rectorship in protest against the state and party. That no. 1 [i.e., Heidegger’s Party activities] was exploited for propaganda purposes both here and abroad, no. 2 [his resignation] hushed up for equally propagandistic reasons, failed to come to my attention and cannot be held against me.

3. You are entirely correct that I failed to provide a public, readily

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comprehensible counter-declaration; it would have been the end of both me and my family. On this point, Jaspers said: that we remain alive is our guilt.

4. In my lectures and courses from 1933–44 I incorporated a standpoint that was so unequivocal that among those who were my students, none fell victim to Nazi ideology. My works from this period, if they ever appear, will testify to this fact.

5. An avowal after 1945 was for me impossible: the Nazi supporters announced their change of allegiance in the most loathsome way; I, however, had nothing in common with them.

6. To the serious legitimate charges that you express “about a regime that murdered millions of Jews, that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite,” I can merely add that if instead of “Jews” you had written “East Germans” [i.e., Germans of the eastern territories], then the same holds true for one of the allies, with the difference that everything that has occurred since 1945 has become public knowledge, while the bloody terror of the Nazis in point of fact had been kept a secret from the German people.

Letter from Marcuse to Heidegger of May 12, 1948

4609 Chevy Chase Blvd.
Washington 15, D.C.

Lieber Herr Heidegger,

For a long time I wasn't sure as to whether I should answer your letter of January 20. You are right: a conversation with persons who have not been in Germany since 1933 is obviously very difficult. But I believe that the reason for this is not to be found in our lack of familiarity with the German situation under Nazism. We were very well aware of this situation—perhaps even better aware than people who were in Germany. The direct contact that I had with many of these people in 1947 convinced me of this. Nor can it be explained by the fact that we “judge the beginning of the National Socialist movement from its end.” We knew, and I myself saw it too, that the beginning already contained the end. The difficulty of the conversation seems to me rather to be explained by the fact that people in Germany were exposed to a total perversion of all concepts and feelings, something which very many

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accepted only too readily. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain the fact that a man like yourself, who was capable of understanding Western philosophy like no other, was able to see in Nazism “a spiritual renewal of life in its entirety,” a “redemption of occidental Dasein from the dangers of communism” (which, however, is itself an essential component of that Dasein!). This is not a political but instead an intellectual problem—I am tempted to say: a problem of cognition, of truth. You, the philosopher, have confused the liquidation of occidental Dasein with its renewal? Was this liquidation not already evident in every word of the “leaders,” in every gesture and deed of the SA, long before 1933?

However, I would like to treat only one portion of your letter; otherwise my silence could be interpreted as complicity.

You write that everything that I say about the extermination of the Jews applies just as much to the Allies, if instead of “Jews” one were to insert “East Germans.” With this sentence don’t you stand outside of the dimension in which a conversation between men is even possible—outside of Logos? For only outside of the dimension of logic is it possible to explain, to relativize [*auszugleichen*], to “comprehend” a crime by saying that others would have done the same thing. Even further: how is it possible to equate the torture, the maiming, and the annihilation of millions of men with the forcible relocation of population groups who suffered none of these outrages (apart perhaps from several exceptional instances)? From a contemporary perspective, there seems already to be a night and day difference in humanity and inhumanity in the difference between Nazi concentration camps and the deportations and internments of the postwar years. On the basis of your argument, if the Allies had reserved Auschwitz and Buchenwald—and everything that transpired there—for the “East Germans” and the Nazis, then the account would be in order! If, however, the difference between inhumanity and humanity is reduced to this erroneous calculus, then this becomes the world historical guilt of the Nazi system, which has demonstrated to the world what, after more than 2,000 years of Western Dasein, men can do to their fellow men. It looks as though the seed has fallen upon fertile ground: perhaps we are still experiencing the continuation of what began in 1933. Whether you would still consider it to be a “renewal” I am not sure.

Translated by Richard Wolin