

The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi.

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The Record

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has been considered by many to be one of the titans of 20th century philosophy. His international reputation was assured with the publication in 1927 of *Being and Time*, a book that was characterized by the young Jurgen Habermas as “the most significant philosophical event since Hegel’s *Phanomenologie...*”² The success of *Being and Time* was immediate and its influence pervasive. Many currents of contemporary thought over the past 70 years were inspired by and in some cases directly derived from the work of Heidegger. Among these we can mention existentialism, hermeneutics, postmodernism, eco-feminism, and various trends in psychology, theology, and literature. His writings have influenced thinkers as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Paul Tillich, and countless others. Heidegger’s distinguished career as professor of philosophy at the University of Freiburg was marred by a singular event in his life. After Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 Heidegger the world-renowned philosopher became Heidegger the Nazi, holding membership card number 312589.

The topic of Heidegger’s Nazism has recently stepped out of the pages of scholarly journals and become an issue in the popular press and mass media. Last year, the BBC did a television series about three philosophers who have strongly influenced our epoch, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. The episode on Heidegger could not help but discuss his Nazism. Late last year, the New York Review of Books published an article covering the relationship between Heidegger and his colleagues Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt. All this publicity to what was previously an obscure chapter in the life of a well-known philosopher has caused a ripple of shock and dismay on the part of many. For example, a viewer of the BBC series recently wrote of his consternation that “the depth of his <Heidegger’s> collaboration with the Nazis has only recently ... been brought out.” The long standing myopia in the case of Heidegger can be directly ascribed to a

¹ Note: This essay was originally published as a 3 part series on the World Socialist Web Site. Links to the original publication are pasted below.

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a03.shtml>

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a04.shtml>

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a05.shtml>

² Jurgen Habermas. “On the Publication of the Lectures of 1935.” Trans. Richard Wolin. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Richard Wolin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998. 191.

systematic cover-up that was perpetrated by Heidegger himself during and after his Nazi period, and carried on by his students and apologists to this day. Before we explore the story of the cover-up, itself a long and fascinating page in the annals of historical falsification, let us first establish the facts involved in Heidegger's relationship with the Nazis.

The facts can no longer be seriously contested since the publication of Victor Farias book, *Heidegger and Nazism* in 1987.³ Farias is a Chilean born student of Heidegger's who spent a decade locating virtually all the relevant documents relating to Heidegger's activities in the years from 1933 to 1945. Many of these documents were found in the archives of the former state of East Germany and in the Documentation Center of the former West Berlin. Since the publication of Farias' landmark book, a number of other books and articles have been published that explore the issue of Heidegger's Nazism. An excellent summary of the historical material can be found in an article written in 1988, *Heidegger and the Nazis*.⁴ Much of the material presented in this section is borrowed from this article.

Heidegger was born and raised in the Swabian town of Messkirch in the south of modern Germany. The region was economically backward, dominated by peasant-based agriculture and small scale manufacturing. The politics of the region was infused by a populist Catholicism that was deeply implicated in German nationalism, xenophobia and anti-semitism. Modern culture and with it the ideals of liberalism as well as socialism were viewed as mortal threats. The growing influence throughout Germany of the Social Democratic Party was commonly identified as the main "internal enemy" in this region. In the ensuing decades this area would become one of the bastions of support for Nazism.

Heidegger's family was of lower middle class origin. His mother came from a peasant background and his father was an artisan. He was a promising student and won a scholarship to attend secondary school in Konstanz. There he attended a preparatory school for the novitiate. The school was established by the Catholic Church hierarchy as a bastion of conservatism against the growing influence of liberalism and Protestantism in the region. Nevertheless some of the secular faculty of the school held decisively democratic and progressive ideals. Their lectures were among the most popular at the school. We do not know exactly how these progressive ideas were received by the young Heidegger. We do know that at an early and formative period he was already confronted by the interplay of ideas that were battling for supremacy in his part of Germany. We also know that by the time Heidegger received his baccalaureate degree, he had rejected the vocation of priest in favor of that of scholar. He also became heavily involved in the partisan and cultural struggles of his time. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was a leader in a student movement that embraced the ideals of right wing Catholic populism.

The reactionary and xenophobic forces in the region were strengthened following the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The outcome of the war, enshrined in the Versailles treaty, was not only a humiliating defeat for the nationalists, but also resulted in the loss a territory to France. The lost territories became a cause celebre

³ Victor Farias. *Heidegger and Nazism*. Temple University Press, 1989.

⁴ Thomas Sheehan. "Heidegger and the Nazis." *New York Review of Books*. June 16, 1988.

among right wing nationalist circles after the war. The Russian Revolution on the other hand, while inspiring the working class of Germany spread fear and horror among the largely Catholic peasants in the rural south. A sense of crisis of world historic dimensions dominated the ideology of the right wing nationalist movements of the period. The *zeitgeist* of crisis was given voice by the philosopher Oswald Spengler, who in turn was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche. We know that Heidegger early on in his career expressed sympathies for the nationalist viewpoint. It is also a fact that the sense of crisis that emerged in this historical confluence would be a theme that Heidegger the philosopher would retain for his entire career.

Documentary evidence exists that Heidegger expressed sympathy for the Nazis as early as 1932. Given his previous history, this should not come as a shock. Immediately following Hitler's seizure of power, Heidegger joined the Nazis. Heidegger was a dues-paying member of the NSDAP (the Nazi party) from 1933 to 1945. He became the rector of Freiburg University in April of 1933, three months after Hitler came to power. His infamous inaugural address was delivered on May 27, 1933. Heidegger apologists have claimed that this address represented an attempt to assert the autonomy of the university against the Nazis attempts to subordinate the sciences to their reactionary doctrines. In fact, the address was a call to arms for the student body and the faculty to serve the new Nazi regime. It celebrates the Nazi ascendancy as "the march our people has begun into its future history". Heidegger identifies the German nation with the Nazi state in prose that speaks of "the historical mission of the German *Volk*, a *Volk* that knows itself in its state". There is even a reference to the fascist ideology of zoological determinism when Heidegger invokes "the power to preserve, in the deepest way, the strengths [of the *Volk*] which are rooted in soil and blood."

On June 30, 1933 Heidegger gave a speech to the Heidelberg Student Association in which he gave his views on the role of the university in the new Nazi order. The following excerpt speaks for itself. It provides a glimpse of Heidegger's commitment to the Nazi ideals of blood, race and absolute subservience to the *Fuhrer*.

"It [the university] must be integrated into the *Volksgemeinschaft* and be joined together with the state...

Up to now, research and teaching have been carried on at the universities as they were carried out for decades... Research got out of hand and concealed its uncertainty behind the idea of international scientific and scholarly progress. Teaching that had become aimless hid behind examination requirements.

A fierce battle must be fought against this situation in the National Socialist spirit, and this spirit cannot be allowed to be suffocated by humanizing, Christian ideas that suppress its unconditionality...

Danger comes not from work for the State. It comes only from indifference and resistance. For that reason, only true strength should have access to the right path, but not halfheartedness...

University study must again become a risk, not a refuge for the cowardly. Whoever does not survive the battle, lies where he falls. The new courage must accustom itself to steadfastness, for the battle for the institutions where our leaders are educated will continue for a long time. It will be fought out of the strengths of the new Reich that Chancellor Hitler will bring to reality. A hard race with no thought of self must fight this

battle, a race that lives from constant testing and that remains directed toward the goal to which it has committed itself. It is a battle to determine who shall be the teachers and leaders at the university.”⁵

After the war Heidegger tried to paint an exculpatory picture of his term as Rector, claiming that he was defending the integrity of the university against the Nazi’s attempts to politicize it. Unfortunately for him the documentary evidence provided by this speech and others like it blow up his attempted alibi.

Existing documentary evidence from Heidegger’s period as Rector traces the following events:

- On August 21, 1933 Heidegger established the *Fuhrer*-principle at Freiburg. This meant that the rector would not be elected by the faculty as had been the custom, but would henceforth be appointed by the Nazi minister of Education. In that capacity, the *Fuhrer*-rector would have absolute authority over the life of the university. On October 1, 1933 his goal was realized when he was officially appointed *Fuhrer* of Freiburg University. For Heidegger this was a milestone on the way to fulfilling his ultimate ambition, which was to become the leading philosopher of the Nazi regime. He envisioned a relationship in which he would become the philosopher-consul to Hitler.
- On September 4, 1933, in declining an appointment to the University of Munich, he wrote, “When I put personal reasons aside for the moment, I know I ought to decide to work at the task that lets me best serve the work of Adolf Hitler.”⁶
- On November 3, 1933, in his role as *Fuhrer*-rector, Heidegger issued a decree applying the Nazi laws on racial cleansing to the student body of the university. The substance of the decree awarded economic aid to students belonging to the SS, the SA and other military groups. “Jewish or Marxist students” or anyone considered non-Aryan according to Nazi law would be denied financial aid.⁷
- On December 13, 1933, Heidegger solicited financial support from German academics for a book of pro-Hitler speeches that was to be distributed around the world. He added on the bottom of the letter that “Needless to say, non-Aryans shall not appear on the signature page.”⁸
- On December 22, 1933, Heidegger wrote to the Baden minister of education urging that in choosing among applicants for a professorship one should question “which of the candidates ... offers the greatest assurance of carrying out the National Socialist will for education.”⁹

The documentary evidence also shows that while Heidegger was publicly extolling the Nazi cause, he was privately working to destroy the careers of students and colleagues who were either Jewish or whose politics was suspect. Among the damning evidence that has been revealed:

⁵ Martin Heidegger. “The University in the New Reich.” Wolin. 44-45.

⁶ Farias. 164.

⁷ Sheehan. “Heidegger and the Nazis.”

⁸ Sheehan. “Heidegger and the Nazis.”

⁹ Sheehan. “Heidegger and the Nazis.”

- Hermann Staudinger, a chemistry professor at Freiburg who would go on to win the Nobel prize in 1953, was secretly denounced by Heidegger as a former pacifist during World War I. This information was conveyed to the local minister of education on February 10, 1934. Staudinger was faced with the loss of his job and his pension. Some weeks later Heidegger interceded with the minister to recommend a milder punishment. The motivation for this action had nothing to do with any pangs of conscience or compassion, but was simply an expedient response to what Heidegger feared would be adverse international publicity to the dismissal of a well-known scholar. He wrote the minister, "I hardly need to remark that as regards the issue nothing of course can change. It's simply a question of avoiding as much as possible, any new strain on foreign policy."¹⁰ The ministry forced Staudinger to submit his resignation and then kept him in suspense for six months before tearing it up and reinstating him.
- The case of Eduard Baumgarten provides another example of the crass opportunism and vindictiveness exhibited by Heidegger. Baumgarten was a student of American philosophy who had lectured at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920's. He returned to Germany to study under Heidegger and the two men struck up a close friendship. In 1931 however a personal falling out ensued after Heidegger opposed Baumgarten's work in American pragmatism. Baumgarten left Freiburg to teach American philosophy at the University of Gottingen. On December 16, 1933, Heidegger, once more in his role as stool-pigeon, wrote a letter to the head of the Nazi professors at Gottingen that said, "By family background and intellectual orientation Dr. Baumgarten comes from the Heidelberg circle of liberal democratic intellectuals around Max Weber. During his stay here [at Freiburg] he was anything but a National Socialist. I am surprised to hear that he is lecturing at Gottingen: I cannot imagine on the basis of what scientific works he got the license to teach. After failing with me, he frequented, very actively, the Jew Frankel, who used to teach at Gottingen and just recently was fired from here [under Nazi racial laws]."¹¹ Dr. Vogel, the recipient of this letter thought that it was "charged with hatred" and refused to use it. His successor however sent it to the minister of education in Berlin who suspended Baumgarten and recommended that he leave the country. Fortunately for Baumgarten he was able to get a copy of the Heidegger letter through the intercession of a sympathetic secretary. It is only due to this circumstance that this piece of documentary evidence still exists. It is impossible to guess how many other poisoned letters were penned by Heidegger in this period. Baumgarten was fortunate enough to win back his job after appealing to the Nazi authorities. These facts were brought to light during de-Nazification hearings in 1946.
- Mention might be made of an incident with Max Muller. Muller, who became a prominent Catholic intellectual after the war, was one of Heidegger's best students from 1928 to 1933. He was also an opponent of Nazism. He stopped attending Heidegger's lectures after the latter joined the Nazi party on May 1, 1933. Several months later, Heidegger used his authority as *Fuhrer*-rector to fire Muller from his position as student leader on the grounds that Muller was "not politically

¹⁰ Sheehan. "Heidegger and the Nazis."

¹¹ Sheehan. "Heidegger and the Nazis."

appropriate.”¹² That was not the end of the story. In 1938 Heidegger, although no longer rector, once again intervened with the authorities to block Muller from getting an appointment as a lecturer at Freiburg. He wrote the university administration that Muller was “unfavorably disposed” toward the regime.¹³ This single sentence effectively meant the end of Muller’s academic career. Muller, learning of this, paid a personal call on Heidegger asking him to strike the incriminating sentence from his recommendation. Heidegger, playing the role of Pilate, refused to do so, lecturing Muller by invoking his Catholicism. “As a Catholic you must know that everyone has to tell the truth.”¹⁴

- Finally, there is the matter of Heidegger’s treatment of his former teacher, Edmund Husserl. Husserl founded the philosophical school of phenomenology and had an international reputation equal to that of Heidegger. Husserl was also a Jew. He fell under the edict of the racial cleansing laws and was denied the use of the University library at Freiburg. In carrying out the Nazi edicts, Heidegger was not simply doing his duty as a Nazi *Fuhrer*-rector. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Heidegger enthused in accomplishing a mission with which he closely identified. According to the testimony of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s widow, Heidegger was personally an anti-Semite. In the past few years other evidence has come to light to suggest that Heidegger’s anti-Semitism did not disappear after the war. One eyewitness, Rainer Marten, recounted a conversation with Heidegger in the late 1950s in which the distinguished professor expressed alarm at the renewal of Jewish influence in the philosophy departments of German universities.¹⁵

Apologists for Heidegger, most recently Rudiger Safranski, have sought to exonerate him from any personal responsibility for the fate of Husserl. They point out that Heidegger never signed any edicts specifically limiting Husserl’s access to the university facilities.¹⁶ Yet this narrowly construed defense hardly absolves Heidegger of his complicity as an agent in carrying out Nazi anti-Jewish edicts, edicts that he knew would have a devastating impact on former friends and colleagues. Nor is any explanation possible that would redeem Heidegger from the shameful act of removing his dedication to his mentor Husserl from *Being and Time* when that work was reissued in 1941.

After the war Heidegger would make much of the fact that he resigned his post as rector after June 30, 1934. This coincided with the infamous ‘Night of the Long Knives’, which saw forces loyal to Hitler stage a three day carnage resulting in the assassination of Ernst Rohm and over one hundred of his Storm Troopers. Heidegger was later to maintain that after this date he broke definitively with Nazism. Yet in a lecture on

¹² Sheehan. “Heidegger and the Nazis.”

¹³ Sheehan. “Heidegger and the Nazis.”

¹⁴ Sheehan. “Heidegger and the Nazis.”

¹⁵ George Leaman. “Strategies of Deception: The Composition of Heidegger’s Silence.” *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust*. Ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg. Humanities Press, 1996. 64.

¹⁶ Rudiger Safranski. *Martin Heidegger. Between Good and Evil*. Trans. Ewald Osers. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1998. 257.

metaphysics given a year after this event Heidegger publicly refers to “the inner truth and greatness of National Socialism.”

“The stuff which is now being bandied about as the philosophy of National Socialism-but which has not the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter between global technology and modern man) – is casting its net in these troubled waters of ‘values’ and ‘totalities’.”¹⁷

It is also true that Heidegger began to distance himself from certain aspects of National Socialism. Farias’ book convincingly argues that after 1934 Heidegger counterposed to the existing Nazi regime an idealized vision of a National Socialism that might have been. According to Farias, this utopian Nazism was identified in Heidegger’s mind with the defeated faction of Rohm. The thesis of Heidegger’s relationship with Rohm has generated a great deal of controversy and has never been satisfactorily resolved. It is however an incontrovertible fact that Heidegger did believe in a form of Nazism, “the inner truth of this great movement”, till the day he died.

There is another biographical fact that the Heidegger apologists cannot pass over. Heidegger was a life-long friend of a man named Eugen Fischer. Fischer was active in the early years of Nazi rule as a leading proponent of racial legislation. He was the head of the Institute of Racial Hygiene in Berlin which propagated Nazi racial theories. One of the “researchers” at his institute was the infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele. Fischer was one of the intellectual authors of the Nazi “final solution.” Heidegger maintained cordial relations with Fischer at least until 1960 when he sent Fischer a Christmas gift with greetings. It would not be stretching credibility too far to suppose that as a result of his personal relationship with Fischer, Heidegger may have had knowledge at a very early period of Nazi plans for genocide.¹⁸

The record shows that after the war Heidegger never made a public or private repudiation of his support for Nazism. This was despite the fact that former friends, including Karl Jaspers and Herbert Marcuse, urged him to speak out, after the fact to be sure, against the many crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Heidegger never did. He did however make a fleeting reference to the Holocaust in a lecture delivered on Dec. 1, 1949. Speaking about technology, he said,

“Agriculture is now a motorized food-industry - in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of the countryside, the same as the production of the hydrogen bombs.”¹⁹

In equating the problems of mechanized agriculture with the Holocaust, thereby trivializing the latter, Heidegger demonstrated his contempt for the Jewish victims of the Nazis. We will return to this theme when we examine Heidegger’s philosophy.

For the most part Heidegger chose to remain silent about his activities on behalf of the Nazis after the war. The few occasions in which Heidegger did venture a public statement were notable. The first instance in which he makes any assessment of this period was a self-serving document that was written for the de-Nazification commission. We will comment on that in the next section. The most important post-war statement

¹⁷ Sheehan.

¹⁸ Richard Wolin. “French Heidegger Wars.” Wolin. 282.

¹⁹ Farias. 287.

Heidegger made about his pre-war political activity was in a 1966 interview with the magazine *Der Spiegel*. This interview was first published, at Heidegger's insistence, after his death in 1976. A great deal of the discussion centers on the question of technology and the threat that unconstrained technology poses to man. Heidegger says at one point,

“A decisive question for me today is: how can a political system accommodate itself to the technological age, and which political system would this be? I have no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy.”²⁰

Having set up an ahistorical notion of technology as an absolute bane to the existence of mankind, Heidegger then explains how he conceived of the Nazi solution to this problem:

“...I see the task in thought to consist in general, within the limits allotted to thought, to achieve an adequate relationship to the essence of technology. National Socialism, to be sure, moved in this direction. But those people were far too limited in their thinking to acquire an explicit relationship to what is really happening today and has been underway for three centuries.”²¹

It is thus beyond dispute that at the time of his death Heidegger thought of Nazism as a political movement that was moving in the right direction. If it failed then this was because its leaders did not think radically enough about the essence of technology.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger. “Only a God Can Save Us”: *Der Spiegel* interview. Wolin. 104.

²¹ Martin Heidegger. “Only a God Can Save Us”: *Der Spiegel* interview. Wolin. 111.

The Cover-up

Having reviewed some of the pertinent facts in the career of Martin Heidegger, we must now turn to the myths and evasions that constitute the building blocks of Heidegger's post-war reputation. The official version of the story, propounded by Heidegger and his supporters, has it that Heidegger's 1933 turn to Nazism was a youthful mistake, a brief flirtation by a scholar who was naïve about politics and the ways of the world. Within a few months, so the story goes, the young philosopher realized his mistake, resigned his position as Rector and refused henceforth to take part in Nazi activities. Furthermore, the legend continues, even during his period as Rector, Heidegger tried to protect the integrity of the university from the worst predations of Nazism and personally intervened with the Nazi authorities on behalf of a number of Jewish students and colleagues. Finally, even if one is not convinced by this account of events, the most that one can say is that Heidegger the man suffered from a character flaw. Heidegger's personal failing, however, is an entirely separate matter from his philosophy, which must be judged 'on its own merits.' Concretely this means that any assessment of Heidegger's philosophy that tries to relate it to his Nazism is deemed illegitimate by his defenders. This viewpoint further implies that there is nothing in Heidegger's pre-Nazi philosophy, particularly in *Being and Time* that bears any affinity to Nazi ideas. Similarly, the later turn [*Kehre*] in Heidegger's philosophy has been interpreted as a purely internal reaction, unrelated to politics, to problems encountered in the initial formulation of his thought.

This is a multi-layered effort at damage control. One can view the cover-up as a redoubt upon whose walls Heidegger's supporters stand fighting to prevent a breach. If the facade, the story of Heidegger's youthful indiscretion, is broken, all is not lost. The inner wall, Heidegger's actions as rector in defiance of the Nazis, still stands. Even if this line of defense is broken, and the supporters are forced to concede the defects of Heidegger the man, there still stands the last line of defense, the so-called autonomy of Heidegger's philosophy. Marshaling an impressive array of intellectuals in his defense, many with impeccable anti-Nazi credentials, Heidegger managed to maintain his reputation relatively intact until the middle of the 1980s.

One can trace the beginnings of the campaign to rescue Heidegger's reputation from the verdict of posterity to the efforts of Heidegger himself. The outlines of the legend of the politically naïve scholar are already adumbrated in the biographical essay Heidegger submitted to the de-Nazification committee in 1945. Here he wrote:

“ In April 1933, I was unanimously elected Rector (with two abstentions) in a plenary session of the university and not, as rumor has it, appointed by the National Socialist minister. [That appointment would come later when Heidegger was made *Fuhrer* of the university, something he fails to mention. A.S.] It was as a result of pressure from my circle of colleagues...that I consented to be a candidate for this elected and agreed to serve. Previously I neither desired nor occupied an academic office. I never belonged to a political party [This is not exactly the full story as we know that in his early 20s he was the president of a right wing Catholic youth movement. A.S.] nor maintained a relation, either personal or substantive, with the NSDAP or with governmental

authorities. I accepted the rectorship reluctantly and in the interest of the university alone.”²²

Having painted a picture of his reluctant enlistment as Rector, the letter then proceeds to portray how he joined the Nazi party, almost as an afterthought, in order to facilitate administrative relations with the university.

“A short while after I took control of the rectorship the district head presented himself, accompanied by two functionaries in charge of university matters, to urge me, in accordance with the wishes of the minister, to join the Party. The minister insisted that in this way my official relations with the Party and the governing organs would be simplified, especially since up until then I had no contact with these organs. After lengthy considerations, I declared myself ready to enter the Party in the interests of the university, but under the express condition of refusing to accept a position within the Party or working on behalf of the Party either during the rectorship or afterward.” [He fails to explain here why, if his Party membership was motivated by his desire to facilitate his work as rector, he renewed his party membership every year until 1945, long after his duties as rector were terminated. A. S.]²³

Finally he presents evidence of his opposition to Nazism after his resignation as rector in 1934.

“After my resignation from the rectorship it became clear that by continuing to teach, my opposition to the principles of the National Socialist world-view would only grow... Since National Socialist ideology became increasingly inflexible and increasingly less disposed to a purely philosophical interpretation, [The ‘purely philosophical interpretation’ is apparently how Heidegger wishes to convey to the reader his initial attraction to Nazism, which unfortunately had lost its metaphysical lustre by 1934. A.S.] the fact that I was active as a philosopher was itself a sufficient expression of opposition...

I also demonstrated publicly my attitude toward the Party by not participating in its gatherings, by not wearing its regalia, and, as of 1934, by refusing to begin my courses and lectures with the so-called German greeting [*Heil Hitler!*]... [We now know from some of the documentation published by Farias that this last statement is a patent lie. A.S.]

There was nothing special about my spiritual resistance during the last eleven years.”²⁴

By presenting himself as accidentally caught up in a form of ‘philosophical’ Nazism for a brief period that was later transformed into one of ‘spiritual resistance’ Heidegger tried to build a wall around his philosophical views. The methods he employed were silence about much of his activity before and after 1933, evasions, half-truths and outright lies.

In Heidegger’s philosophy, the category of ‘silence’ denotes not simply the absence of speech but is itself an active form of being in the world. Likewise in his practice ‘silence’ has meant the active suppression of evidence about his Nazi years. Much of Heidegger’s correspondence and other personal documents have been

²² Martin Heidegger. “Letter to the Rector of Freiburg University, November 4, 1945. Wolin. 61.

²³ Martin Heidegger. “Letter to the Rector of Freiburg University, November 4, 1945. Wolin. 64.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger. “Letter to the Rector of Freiburg University, November 4, 1945. Wolin. 64-66.

unavailable to scholars for decades. These documents are kept under lock and key by the Heidegger family and sympathetic scholars. Furthermore, in the immediate post-war years, the academic community in Germany had been loathe to publicize anything related to Heidegger's Nazism. One early scholar who did much original research in this area, Guido Schneeberger, found that he could not find a publisher for his book. He eventually published his findings on his own in 1962.

Nor has Heidegger shied away from out and out falsification of his own history. A well-documented example involves the republication of his 1935 lecture on metaphysics. The 1953 edition of this lecture includes the infamous depiction of the "inner truth" of Nazism. The full statement in the 1953 edition read as follows:

"The stuff which is now being bandied about as the philosophy of National Socialism-but which has not the least to do with the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter between global technology and modern man) – is casting its net in these troubled waters of 'values' and 'totalities'." ²⁵

The publication of this article caused a bit of consternation in Germany. Some questioned why Heidegger chose to reprint this article in this exact form. Heidegger responded by saying,

"It would have been easy to drop the aforementioned sentence, along with other ones you cite, from the printed manuscript. But I did not and I will keep it there in the future because, for one thing, the sentences belong historically to the lecture course..."²⁶

We now know that Heidegger did indeed make changes to the 1935 text when he prepared it for republication. For one thing, the more general 'inner truth and greatness of **this movement**' is actually the much more specific 'inner truth and greatness of National Socialism' in the original lecture. When an assistant helping him prepare the galley proofs for publication noticed this phrase, without any explanatory text, he asked Heidegger to remove it. Heidegger responded that he would not do so. Nevertheless, without telling his assistant, Heidegger did change the text a few weeks later. He removed the direct reference to 'National Socialism' and substituted the general term 'this movement'. He also added the explanatory comment about technology in parenthesis. Heidegger always maintained until his death that he never altered the text of this lecture. He reiterated this point in his 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview. In a later attempt to finally settle this controversy, a search was made of the original 1935 manuscript of the lecture. The page containing the controversial phrase was missing. ²⁷

The same methods, suppression of evidence, evasions and falsifications, were employed by the legions of Heidegger interpreters and apologists. They were, until the publication of Farias epochal book, largely successful in preventing any critical scrutiny of Heidegger's ideas and their relation to his politics. An ironic chapter in this enterprise was played out by the deconstruction theorist, Paul De Man. De Man did much to publicize Heidegger among the American intelligentsia in the 1960s. Then there came the posthumous revelation in the late 1980s that De Man's hands had not exactly been clean. He had been a Nazi collaborator in occupied Belgium during World War II and in that capacity had written some anti-Semitic articles for a Nazi-sponsored literary

²⁵ Sheehan. "Heidegger and the Nazis."

²⁶ Sheehan. "Heidegger and the Nazis."

²⁷ Sheehan. "Heidegger and the Nazis."

magazine. After De Man's war-time essays were published there ensued a lively controversy about the relationship between De Man's war-time activity and his subsequent ideas on deconstruction.²⁸

An even more sinister champion of Heidegger was the French translator Jean Beaufret. Beaufret, a former Resistance fighter, published several volumes of *Conversations with Heidegger* before his death in 1982. For 35 years he was the most consistent defender of Heidegger in France. His credentials as a former Resistance fighter lent added weight to his defense of a former Nazi. Yet it seems that all along Beaufret had a hidden agenda. He had been for some time a secret sympathizer of the notorious Holocaust revisionist historian Robert Faurisson. Beaufret, like Faurisson, denied the existence of the Holocaust and more specifically of the gas chambers. In a letter sent to Faurisson, Beaufret was quoted as saying,

"I believe that for my part I have traveled approximately the same path as you and have been considered suspect for having expressed the same doubts [concerning the existence of the gas chambers]. Fortunately for me, this was done orally."²⁹

Beaufret's credentials were never questioned until Faurisson published his letters in the 1980s.

As part of their public relations campaign Heidegger and his apologists were particularly keen to enlist the testimony of German Jewish philosophers who had themselves suffered under the Nazis. To this end the well-known philosopher and German émigré Hanna Arendt was solicited to write an essay for an anthology honoring Heidegger on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Arendt's essay, "Heidegger at Eighty" contains the following cryptic allusion to Heidegger's political activities:

"Now we all know that Heidegger, too, once succumbed to the temptation to change his 'residence' and to get involved in the world of human affairs. As to the world, he was served somewhat worse than Plato because the tyrant and his victims were not located beyond the sea, but in his own country. [The reference is to the sojourn Plato undertook to Syracuse. He hoped to counsel the tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysus. After a relatively brief experiment in seeking to temper Dionysus rule with a dose of wisdom, Plato returned to Athens, concluding that his attempt to put his theories into practice had been a failure. A.S.] As to Heidegger himself, I believe that the matter stands differently. He was still young enough to learn from the shock of the collision, which after ten short hectic months thirty-seven years ago drove him back to his residence, and to settle in his thinking what he had experienced..."

We who wish to honor the thinkers, even if our own residence lies in the midst of the world, can hardly help finding it striking and perhaps exasperating that Plato and Heidegger, when they entered into human affairs, turned to tyrants and *Führers*. This should be imputed not just to the circumstances of the times and even less to preformed character, but rather to what the French call a *déformation professionnelle*. For the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers (Kant is the great exception). And if this tendency is not demonstrable in what they did,

²⁸ Denis Donoghue. "The Strange Case of Paul De Man." *New York Review of Books*. June 29, 1989.

²⁹ Richard Wolin. "French Heidegger Wars." Wolin. 282.

that is only because very few of them were prepared to go beyond ‘the faculty of wondering at the simple’ and to ‘accept this wondering as their abode.’”³⁰

According to the legal brief presented by Arendt, Heidegger’s unfortunate lapse was due neither to the circumstances in which he lived, nor to his character, and certainly has no echo in his ideas. The fact that Heidegger became a Nazi, which she euphemistically describes as, having “succumbed to the temptation to change his ‘residence’ and to get involved in the world of human affairs,” can be ascribed solely to the occupational hazard of being a philosopher. And if other philosophers did not follow in these footsteps, that can be explained by the fact that they did not take thinking as seriously as Heidegger. They were not prepared to ‘accept this wondering as their abode.’

Arendt’s piece is notable for its sheer effrontery. She manages to make Heidegger into the victim who fell prey to the greatness of his thought. To say that, “He was served worse than Plato,” is to imply that he was tossed about by forces beyond his control, that he bore no responsibility for his own actions. As if recognizing the absurdity of her position, Arendt shifts the argument from the body of her text into a long explanatory footnote. In this note she descends from the lofty rhetoric of her musings on Plato to some of the concrete issues surrounding the Heidegger affair. She returns to the theme of Heidegger’s primal innocence and political naiveté, writing that,

“...the point of the matter is that Heidegger, like so many other German intellectuals, Nazis and anti-Nazis, of his generation never read *Mein Kampf*.”³¹

Actually there is good evidence to suppose that Heidegger not only did read Hitler’s opus, *Mein Kampf*, but approved of it. Tom Rockmore has convincingly argued that in his speech assuming the rectorate of Freiburg, Heidegger’s

“multiple allusions to battle are also intended as a clear allusion to Hitler’s notorious view of the struggle for the realization of the destiny of the German people formulated in *Mein Kampf*.”³²

At a later point in her note, Arendt seeks to turn the tables on Heidegger’s critics by trotting out the legend, manufactured by Heidegger himself, of his redemptive behavior following his “error.”

“Heidegger himself corrected his own "error" more quickly and more radically than many of those who later sat in judgment over him—he took considerably greater risks than were usual in German literary and university life during that period.”³³

Even in 1971, Hannah Arendt certainly knew better, or should have known better than the tale she relates in this embarrassing apologia. She certainly knew for instance of Heidegger’s 1953 republication of his essay discussing the “inner truth of National Socialism.” She was also aware, through her friendship with Karl Jaspers, of the deplorable behavior Heidegger exhibited toward Jaspers and his Jewish wife. (Heidegger broke off all personal relations with Jaspers and his wife shortly after he became rector. It was only after the war that Heidegger tried to repair their personal relationship. Despite an intermittent exchange of letters, the two philosophers never could never repair their personal relationship as a result of Heidegger’s refusal to recant his support of Nazism.)

³⁰ Hannah Arendt. “Martin Heidegger at Eighty.” *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 21, 1971.

³¹ Arendt. “Martin Heidegger at Eighty.”

³² Tom Rockmore. *On Heidegger’s Nazism and Philosophy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 69.

³³ Arendt. “Martin Heidegger at Eighty.”

The reference to the “considerably greater risks” he took, is, like Heidegger’s ‘spiritual opposition’ to Nazism, an echo of Heidegger’s own post-war fabrications. Why then did Hannah Arendt, a prominent liberal opponent of fascism, weigh in with such fervor in the attempt to rehabilitate Heidegger’s reputation? One can only guess. Perhaps there was an element of loyalty to her former teacher, a loyalty that was strained but not broken by her persecution at the hands of the Nazis and her years in exile. (At one point she found herself in a Nazi prison. Later when war broke out, she was trapped in Nazi-occupied France, from which she managed a daring escape.) The most charitable interpretation of her grotesque defense of Heidegger is that she turned away from a truth that she could not face.

When Farias’s book hit the stores, it had an electrifying effect on Heidegger’s followers in France. Following the publication of his *Heidegger and Nazism* in October of 1987, no less than six studies on the subject of Heidegger and Nazism were published in the following nine months. This should not have been a surprise. It was in France, after all, that Heidegger’s influence found its deepest roots in the post-war period. The French debt to Heidegger extends from the existentialism of Sartre in the early post-war period to the more recent waves of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction associated with Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Also weighing in with their own interpretations of Heidegger’s relation to Nazism were the post-modernists Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

One could broadly speaking, break down the type of responses to Farias into three main categories. The first is the unconditional defense of Heidegger by his most orthodox keepers of the flame. This group is represented by Francois Fedier, who since the death of his teacher Beaufret, has been the most consistent defender of Heidegger in France. Fedier continues to deny that Heidegger ever had any problem with Nazism and simply dismisses the rectorate period as a youthful flirtation that has no bearing on Heidegger’s thought. Fedier’s response, in light of the voluminous material in Farias’s book and others published since, commands little credibility outside of the most ardent devotees of the Heidegger cult.

The second type of response, represented by Derrida and his followers, is to acknowledge in general that there is a problem with Heidegger’s philosophy insofar as it allowed him to realize its implications by becoming a Nazi. But then Derrida tries to turn the tables on Farias by insisting that the ultimate cause of Heidegger’s turn to Nazism was the fact that Heidegger had not sufficiently emancipated himself by 1933 from pre-Heideggerian ways of thinking, particularly rationalism and humanism. According to Derrida’s tortured logic, once Heidegger succeeded in liberating himself from ‘metaphysics’ following his post 1935 ‘turn’, his philosophy became the best form of anti-Nazism.

This perverse view-point was aptly summed up by one of Derrida’s students, Lacoue-Labarthe, who said that “Nazism is a humanism.” By this he meant that the philosophical foundations that underpinned the Enlightenment tradition of humanism had as their consequences the domination of humanity in the service of an all-encompassing universal-totalitarianism. Such thinking has become a common stock in trade of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and their followers. The notion that Nazism is just another expression of

Enlightenment universalism has recently been expressed by the Americans Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg. They write,

“This principle of sufficient reason, the basis of calculative thinking, in its totalizing, and imperialistic, form, can be seen as the metaphysical underpinning which made the Holocaust possible.”³⁴

From this premise, Lacoue-Labarthe builds a sophisticated defense of Heidegger. Unlike the orthodox Heideggerians, he concedes that Heidegger’s thought was consistent with his Nazism. However, Lacoue-Labarthe then seeks to rescue Heidegger by claiming that the post-1935 Heidegger who had overcome metaphysics and humanism, was free from any Nazi blemish. This bizarre argument is then carried to its logical conclusion by other deconstructionists who insist that not only is the second coming of Heidegger free of the fascist taint, but that his work for the first time makes it possible for us to “think the Holocaust.” Lest the reader thinks this is a polemical extravagance, listen to the words of Milchman and Rosenberg,

“While facets of Heidegger’s thinking can provide insight into the experience of the Extermination, make it possible for us to think Auschwitz, the Holocaust can also help us to penetrate the opaqueness of the later Heidegger’s thinking.”³⁵

Heidegger’s accusers on the other hand have been dubbed “totalitarians” in some of the annals of the deconstructionists. Once more, as we saw in Arendt’s piece, Heidegger was portrayed as a victim of small-minded and envious enemies. Weighing in on the French debate from the other side of the Rhine was the long-time Heidegger interpreter Hans-Georg Gadamer. In a curious echo of Hannah Arendt’s 1971 essay, “Heidegger at Eighty”, Gadamer returns to the image of the well-meaning but naïve thinker retreating from his attempt to educate the prince of Syracuse.³⁶

In contrast to the philosophical obscurantism practiced by Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, some voices have been raised in the French discussion that clearly acknowledge the problem posed by Heidegger’s lifelong relationship to fascism. Most prominent among these is Pierre Bourdieu who wrote a major study on Heidegger long before Farias’s book even appeared. This book was republished in French in a somewhat revised format after the controversy elicited by Farias’s book broke. *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, attempts to ground Heidegger’s philosophy in the historical context from which Heidegger emerged. At the same time Bourdieu avoids the temptation of simply reducing Heidegger’s thought to a reflex of his historical and class position. Bourdieu engages in a textual analysis of Heidegger’s work in an attempt to show the intrinsic relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics. His textual analysis is distinguished from the type of “immanent” reading of texts characteristic of Derrida and other deconstructionists that artificially isolate texts from the historical circumstances in which they were produced.

Perhaps the most curious and damning recent defense of Heidegger came not from France but from Germany. Ernst Nolte, a historian and long-time friend of the Heidegger family, published a biography of Heidegger in 1992, *Martin Heidegger: Politics and*

³⁴ Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg. “Heidegger, Planetary Technics, and the Holocaust.”, Milchman and Rosenberg. 222.

³⁵ Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg. “Heidegger, Planetary Technics, and the Holocaust.”, Milchman and Rosenberg. 224.

³⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer. “Back From Syracuse?” *Critical Inquiry* 15(2): 1989. 427-430.

History in His Life and Thought. Prior to the publication of this book, Nolte was already notorious as a revisionist historian of the Holocaust and apologist for Nazism. Nolte has to be given his due as he was much more consistent and far more intellectually honest than some of the French defenders of Heidegger. For Nolte, Heidegger's turn to Nazism does not represent any problem at all. Not only does Nolte insist on the intimate connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his Nazism, but he also defends Nazism as a necessary response to the internal and external threat posed by the Russian Revolution. To Nolte Nazism was a necessary response to Bolshevism and Heidegger, by turning to Nazism was merely responding to the call of historical necessity. Nolte even goes so far as to defend the Holocaust as a defensive measure made necessary by the hostility of world-Jewry to the National Socialist regime. Nolte's defense of the Holocaust is couched in the following rhetorical question:

“Could it be the case that the National Socialists and Hitler carried out an “Asiatic” deed [the Holocaust] only because they considered themselves and their kind to be potential or actual victims of a [Soviet] “Asiatic” deed. Didn't the “Gulag Archipelago” precede Auschwitz?”³⁷

There is a symmetry between the early apologists for Heidegger and Nolte's effort. Whereas the original defenders sought to minimize Heidegger's political involvement, then to build a wall between his politics and his philosophy, Nolte inverts the terms of the argument. Not only was Heidegger a politically engaged thinker from the start in Nolte's view, but he made the right choice. He writes,

“Insofar as Heidegger resisted the attempt at the [Communist] solution, he, like countless others, was historically right ... In committing himself to the [National Socialist] solution perhaps he became a “fascist.” But in no way did that make him historically wrong from the outset.”³⁸

Elsewhere Nolte returns to the story of Heidegger the otherworldly thinker who became briefly ensnared in political matters that he did not understand. This fertile image, introduced by Hannah Arendt, is turned on its head by Nolte. Doubtless he did not wish to let a Jew get in the last word here. He writes of Heidegger's support for Hitler that,

“...it was not an episodic ‘flight’ from the realm of philosophy into everyday politics but was sustained by a ‘philosophical’ hope...[and was] essential to his life and thought.”³⁹

In other words, Heidegger's thought and his practice were cut from the same cloth. He was not just a Nazi, but in the words of Thomas Sheehan, he was “a normal Nazi.”

Finally, mention should be made of the most recent biography of Heidegger, Rudiger Safranski's *Martin Heidegger. Between Good and Evil*, first published in English in 1998. This book, unlike Nolte's effusive support for Heidegger's Nazism, is a retreat back to a more orthodox defense of Heidegger. Once again, we are presented with a schizophrenic division between Heidegger the man and the philosopher. The author diligently presents the known facts of Heidegger's association with Nazism. It is no longer tenable to deny these facts. At the same time he provides a largely positive reading

³⁷ Cited in Thomas Sheehan. “A Normal Nazi.” *New York Review of Books*. January 14, 1993.

³⁸ Cited in Thomas Sheehan. “A Normal Nazi.”

³⁹ Cited in Thomas Sheehan. “A Normal Nazi.”

of Heidegger's ideas. While avoiding the excesses and logical gymnastics of Lacoue-Labarthe and other deconstructionists, Safranski seems incapable of making any essential judgment about his subject. This deficiency, a common trademark of modern biography and historiography, is considered an advantage in today's dismal cultural context. The watchwords here are "detached" and "balanced". Despite the minutiae of facts, there is little understanding. In its own way, this book is another contribution to the cover-up. In the end, Safranski weighs in on the side of those who praise Heidegger for making it possible for us to 'think Auschwitz.' He writes,

"The fact that Heidegger rejected the idea that he should defend himself as a potential accomplice to murder does not mean that he shied away from the challenge "to think Auschwitz." When Heidegger refers to the perversion of the modern will to power, for which nature and man have become mere "machinations," he always explicitly or not, also means Auschwitz. To him, as to Adorno, Auschwitz is a typical crime of the modern age."⁴⁰

We cannot let pass commenting on the arrogance of Safranski's juxtaposition of Heidegger with Theodore Adorno. Adorno despised Heidegger and had nothing but contempt for Heidegger's "jargon of authenticity", which he viewed as a form of philosophical charlatanry passing itself off as profound insight. This dismal book, despite its account of the facts, represents but another apology for Heidegger's involvement with Nazism. It has nevertheless met with largely positive reviews. A typical example is Richard Rorty, who wrote,

"Heidegger was oblivious of the torment of his Jewish friends and colleagues, but after a year of hectic propagandizing and organizing, he did notice that the Nazi higher-ups were not paying much attention to him. This sufficed to show him that he had overestimated National Socialism.

So he retreated to his mountain cabin and, as Safranski nicely says, traded decisiveness for imperturbability. After World War II, he explained, imaginatively albeit monomaniacally, that Americanization, modern technology, the trivialization of life and the utter forgetfulness of Being (four names, he thought, for the same phenomenon) were irreversible."⁴¹

Once again we meet the quotidian figure of the well-meaning but bruised thinker who "retreated to his mountain cabin." At least this time we are spared another return from Syracuse. We should point out that there is no basis even in Safranski's book to draw the conclusion that Heidegger, after "a year of hectic propagandizing and organizing", his period as Rector at Freiburg, "withdrew" from the political fray. What Safranski does say is that over a period of **several years** following his resignation as Rector, Heidegger gradually loosened his involvement with Nazism, without cutting them completely until 1945.

It turns out that Heidegger has defenders beyond the legion of French deconstructionists. Rorty represents a tendency that has emerged in recent years among American pragmatists, a tendency that has tried to amalgamate pragmatism with elements of continental philosophy. In his capacity as something of a public spokesman for

⁴⁰ Safranski. 421.

⁴¹ Richard Rorty. Rev. of *Martin Heidegger. Between Good and Evil*, by Rudiger Safranski. New York Times Book Review.

American pragmatism, Rorty has above all sought to enlist the followers of Heidegger to his cause. In the following section we will briefly examine the philosophical basis for this curious amalgam of two seemingly disparate traditions. Yet even the most cursory examination reveals that when Rorty focuses on the relationship between Heidegger's politics and his philosophy, we are served up with another version of the by now familiar theme of Heidegger accidentally stumbling into Nazism. In an essay that had been revised as recently as 1989, well after Farias's book was published, Rorty wrote that,

“...Heidegger was only accidentally a Nazi,”

He then expanded on this thought in a note with the following explanation,

“His [Heidegger's] thought was, indeed, essentially anti-democratic. But lots of Germans who were dubious about democracy and modernity did not become Nazis. Heidegger did because he was both more of a ruthless opportunist and more of a political ignoramus than most of the German intellectuals who shared his doubts.”⁴²

Although Rorty tosses in some harsh words in Heidegger's direction, to wit his characterization of Heidegger the 'ignoramus' and 'opportunist', the gist of his presentation is another caricature of the naïve philosopher getting in over his head. By this time, we have become quite familiar with this argument. We have seen variations of it in Heidegger's own apology for his term as rector, in the orthodox defenders of Heidegger in France, in the reflections of personal friends such as Hannah Arendt, and in its inverted pro-Nazi form in Nolte's biography. That this argument can be repeated *ad nauseam*, in the face of an ever-mounting array of facts demonstrating that Heidegger's relation to Nazism was more than incidental, shows that we are dealing here not with an objective, scholarly judgment, but with bad faith and apologetics.

The debate in France lasted for about two years following the publication of Farias's book in 1987. Nowadays, very little is heard in France about Heidegger's politics. In contrast, since the beginning of the 1990's the discussion has continued unabated in the United States, Great Britain and other English-speaking countries. In fact, three separate books have appeared on the subject since 1997. Of these, Julian Young's book, *Heidegger, philosophy, Nazism*, is foursquare in the tradition of the Heideggerian whitewash. In fact, the author announces his intentions right at the beginning, where he says that,

“This work aims to provide what may be described as a 'de-Nazification' of Heidegger.”⁴³ Tom Rockmore sums up the flavor of Young's book in a recent review. Rockmore writes,

“In sum, according to Young, despite the many texts to the contrary (for instance, the comment in the *Spiegel-Gesprach*, where Heidegger questions the democratic ideal), the same philosopher turns out to be more or less like you and me: to wit, a proponent of liberal democracy. This is to say not a credible but an incredible picture of Heidegger...”⁴⁴

It is evident that a quarter century following the death of Heidegger, the cover-up still continues. At the same time, we do not wish to suggest that there has been an

⁴² Richard Rorty. “Philosophy as Science, Metaphor, Politics”. *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1991. 19.

⁴³ Julian Young. *Heidegger, philosophy, Nazism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997. 1.

⁴⁴ Tom Rockmore. “Recent Discussion of Heidegger and Politics: Young, Beistegui, Fritzsche.” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*. Vol. 21. No.2. 1999. 53.

absence of countervailing tendencies working to expose Heidegger's politics. In fact, we have seen just this past year the publication of what may be the most important examination of Heidegger's philosophy in the context of his politics, namely Johannes Fritsche's work, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time*. We will comment on this book in the next section.

History, Philosophy and Mythology

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 20th 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, 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 18th century came from the monarchists, landholders and the church, the 19th 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 that felt most threatened by the democratic revolutions that began to threaten 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, ten 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.”⁴⁵

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 19th 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 , 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*

⁴⁵ Nietzsche to Baron von Gersdorff, June, 21, 1871. Cited in George Lukacs. *The Destruction of Reason*. Humanities Press. 1981. 325.

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 announcements and etymological sleight-of-hand that try to overpower 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. But perhaps more to the point, 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 ones fate, illustrates the essentially apolitical quality of Heidegger's philosophy. Seemingly, one can chose 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.”⁴⁶ 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 Fritsche 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.”⁴⁷

Fritsche's point is that Heidegger's idiom and use of language was part of a shared tradition of right wing thought that emerged in the twenties 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 Fritsche 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*.”⁴⁸

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. Fritsche maintains that whatever the merits of their own works, the existentialists misunderstood Heidegger. Fritsche'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*, Fritsche compares it with the writings of two other notorious right wing authors who were contemporaries, namely Max Scheler and Adolf Hitler. Fritsche 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 Fritsche exposes is that Heidegger's notion of authenticity bears some relationship to the traditional conception of individual freedom. Fritsche 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

⁴⁶ Jurgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. F Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978. 141.

⁴⁷ Johannes Fritsche. *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time*. University of California Press. 1999. XV.

⁴⁸ Johannes Fritsche. 218-219.

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, Fritsche 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.”⁴⁹

Fritsche 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.”⁵⁰

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, Fritsche 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*.”⁵¹

In characterizing the struggle for authentic *Dasein* as “a cancellation of the world of the inauthentic *Dasein*”, Fritsche is being overly metaphorical. In plain language, “the cancellation of the world of inauthentic *Dasein*” is a reference to the fascist counter-revolution. 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

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row. 1962. 436.

⁵⁰ Johannes Fritsche. 65.

⁵¹ Johannes Fritsche. 67.

of course the persecution and eventual elimination of alien forces in the midst of the *Volk*, most notably the Jews.

If Fritsche'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. Fritsche 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 Fritsche 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."⁵²

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, it was an eclectic assortment of ideologues who 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

⁵² C.G. Jung. *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*. New York. Vintage Books. 1970. 183.

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 19th 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 (1823-1897), 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...”⁵³

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.⁵⁴

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

⁵³ George L. Mosse. *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*. New York. Grosset and Dunlop. 1964. 22.

⁵⁴ 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.

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.”⁵⁵

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, was 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.”⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ George Lukacs. *The Destruction of Reason*. Humanities Press. 1981. 504.

⁵⁶ Tom Rockmore. *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy*. 111.

⁵⁷ Heidegger's former student and friend, Karl Lowith met him while at a conference in Rome in 1936. Lowith, a Jew by birth, had gone into exile after 1933. On the occasion of their meeting, Lowith asked Heidegger how he could sit at the same table “with an individual like Julius Streicher.” Streicher, the notorious editor of *Der Sturmer* was admitted as a member of the board of the Nietzsche Archive.

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.”⁵⁸

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.

Heidegger was a fellow board member. Lowith, in his memoirs, reports that Heidegger’s response to his question about Streicher was to “dismiss the rantings of the of the Gaultier of Franconia as political pornography.” He insisted however on dissociating the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler, from Streicher. Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*. Basic Books.1993. 268.

⁵⁸ Lukacs. 416.

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 batten 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.”*⁵⁹ G.W.F.Hegel, 1806

One of the most curious philosophical trends in the post-war 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 post-war 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 post-modernism:

“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.”⁶⁰

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’.

⁵⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller,(Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 52, Paragraph 80.

⁶⁰ “Notes on the Meaning of ‘Post’”, Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodernism a Reader*, edited by Thomas Docherty, New York, Columbia University Press, 48-49.

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 post-modernists to appropriate the irrationalist tradition that turned its back on the Enlightenment. This is where the Heideggerians, post-modernists, 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”?⁶¹

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 post-modernists, 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.”⁶²

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.”⁶³

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.”⁶⁴

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 1920’s. The warm embrace that Derrida and French post-modernism has received 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

⁶¹ Martin Heidegger. “Letter on Humanism”. *Basic Writings*. Edited. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper and Row. 1977. 235.

⁶² Martin Heidegger. “Letter on Humanism”. *Basic Writings*. 242.

⁶³ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press. 1982. xxxviii.

⁶⁴ Richard Rorty. “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens”. *Essays on Heidegger and Others*. 67.

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 Holderlin. We can discern a similar trend in the works of the post-modernists 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.⁶⁵

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].”⁶⁶

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.”⁶⁷

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

⁶⁵ “The important thing about novelists as compared with theoreticians is that they are good at details.” Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens.” 81.

⁶⁶ Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 66. Paragraph 109.

⁶⁷ Theodore W. Adorno. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Northwestern University Press. 1973. 51.

and class biases, those axioms of everyday life that are accepted by ones 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 post-modernists 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:

1. 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.)
2. 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
3. The working class cannot play a revolutionary role. Some post-modernists 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 post-modernism, 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 lead 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 post-modernists 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 however, 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 20th 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 Juenger'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 habitues 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.”⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin. “Theories of German Fascism”. *Selected Writings: Vol II*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Harvard University Press. 1999. 320-321.