

## Review Essay

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*Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt.* BERNHARD RADLOFF. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Pp. 489, index. \$75.00 cloth. ISBN 0-802-09315-9.

**A**dolf Hitler assumed the Chancellorship of Germany on January 30, 1933. Though his cabinet was not yet composed of a majority of National Socialists, the ideological will espoused by the party had easily captured the political imagination of a country impoverished by the Paris Peace Treaty of 1919. The Nazi reconstitution of the national *Heimat* (homeland), which called for the spiritual resurrection of an essentialized *Volk* (people), gave birth to the Third Reich. The failed Weimar Republic acted as midwife to this modern political abomination which led to the deaths of millions, the destruction of the nation and a Holocaust in which Jews, gypsies and other “undesirables” were slaughtered on an industrial scale. It was within this abyss of history that Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, would find his personal life and professional works dissected, analyzed, and ultimately judged. Heidegger’s 1927 work *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) addressed the question of “being,” which, he wrote, “provided a stimulus for the researches of Plato and Aristotle, only to subside from then on as a theme for actual investigation.”<sup>1</sup> Heidegger’s framing of *Dasein* (*to be there*—“existence”) challenged fundamental ontological assumptions underpinning the epistemologies of Western philosophy. It also ran counter to the aspirations of his mentor, Edmund Husserl, for phenomenology to become a rigorous science. The two parted ways over this question, and upon Husserl’s retirement from the University of Freiburg in 1928, Heidegger was appointed Professor of Philosophy. Elected as Rector of the University in April 1933, Heidegger joined the Nazi party. On May 27, he delivered the *Rektoratsrede* (Rector’s Address) entitled *The Self-Assertion of the German University*, which has been perceived as a Nazi *apologia*. In the address, echoing the quasi mystical-utilitarian tropes of National Socialism, he stated: “...three bonds—by the people, to the destiny of the state, in spiritual mission—are equally *primordial* to the German essence. The three services that arise from it—Labor Service, Military Service, and Knowledge Service—are equally necessary and of equal rank.”<sup>2</sup>

Bernhard Radloff’s excellent but deeply philological *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism* (2007) provides an intellectual history of Heidegger’s thought and publications within the context of the German conservative revolution and the rise of National Socialism in the early twentieth century. Radloff’s work illustrates the few metaphysical commonalities that Heidegger’s thought shared with Nazi ideology; more

importantly, it attempts to illuminate his divergences in areas of race, perception of place and space, biologism, and the role of technology.

A primary assertion of Radloff's is that the Nazi mass mobilization of a social order with its aims to create a global imperial technopolis posed a problematic existential question for Heidegger. According to Radloff, such a problematic question still exists in the twenty-first century despite the relegation of National Socialism to the dustbin of history. And he holds that the current ideologies of globalization and aspirations towards technological utopias make Heidegger's thought relevant to contemporary scholars grappling with these issues:

These ideologies can be subjected to a phenomenological de-construction, and the dis-integrative, functional integration of beings into the planetary technotopia can be brought to light in phenomenological description. This would follow from Heidegger's own practice and from the method of phenomenology.<sup>3</sup>

Radloff, however, does admit that during the early years of the 1930s Heidegger's role as an intellectual and educator seemed bound to the will to power of a historical teleology fostered by the naked ambition of the brown-shirted National Socialist party. In *The German University*, an address given in August 1934, Heidegger proclaimed: "Education of the of the Volk, through the state, to become a *Volk* – that is the meaning of the National Socialist movement....Such education for the highest knowledge is the task of the new University."<sup>4</sup>

Radloff places Heidegger's notion of *Volk* within a conception of *Gestalt* emerging with conservative and nationalist discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. He notes that according to the former, cultural morphology displays a "historically specific rhythm" through which a higher-order *Gestalten* regulates the style of artistic production, the comportment and character of culture and race, institutions, and the unfolding of a people's tradition. In the early days of the Nazi ascendancy Heidegger viewed higher institutions of learning as an *über*-space of culture in which science could help the essence of German *Dasein* unfold to its highest potential: "The will to the essence of the German university is the will to science as the will to the historical mission of the German people as a people that knows itself in its own state. *Together*, science and German fate must come to power in this will to essence."<sup>5</sup>

From a historical perspective, the origins of the German sense of *Volk* can be traced to the first century C.E. In Germania, the historian Tacitus depicted the "barbarian" tribes that inhabited the central European plains and resisted the Roman imperial thrust. In 9 C.E., insurgents from these Germanic tribes under the leadership of Arminius killed Roman general Publius Quinctilius Varus and defeated his three legions at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. Nineteenth-century German nationalists traced the origin of the country to this event. However for Heidegger, as Stuart Elden has noted in *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (2001), the poetry and thought of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-

1843) more comprehensively depicts the “presence of being” which gives birth to the German sense of nation. Heidegger writes that the poet provides “an-other history, that history which starts with the struggle deciding the arrival or flight of the gods.”<sup>6</sup> In *Hölderlins Hymne* (1942) Heidegger postulates that the poet’s river poems illustrate how *Volk* and environment “dwell poetically” in a phenomenological landscape:

The river now founds in the country a characterized space [geprägten Raum] and a delimited place [Ort] of settlement, of communication, [giving] to the people a developable country which guarantees their immediate *Dasein*. The river [Der Strom] is not a watercourse [ein Gewässer] which passes by the place of humans, it is its streaming [Strömen], as a country-developing [alslandbildendes], which founds the possibility of establishing the dwelling of humans.<sup>7</sup>

After resigning as rector from Freiburg in 1934, Heidegger remained a professor and delivered a series of lectures in 1934-5 and 1941-2 on Hölderlin. The lectures reinforced the existence of the German *Volk* unfolding as a dimension of a phenomenological landscape and lay the foundation for Heidegger’s critique, *A Question of Technology*, which he delivered in Bremen in 1949. His lecture (as he was undergoing the process of “denazification”) contains an admission (which has been strongly criticized as inadequate) concerning the true nature of Hitler’s National Socialist regime: “Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.”<sup>8</sup>

As Radloff points out, philosophical fissures had emerged between Heidegger and Nazi party ideologues early on. He rejected the biological premise of the party’s racial policies, and his 1934 work *Logik* deconstructed the Nazi-allied school of *Geopolitik* founded by Karl Haushofer. In *Logik*, Heidegger postulated that in the face of tradition and mission, the presence of *Volk* unfolds within the “ecstatic unity” of the three dimensions of time (past, present, and future) which seem to transcend *Geopolitik*’s concepts of limit and border (*Grenze*). Radloff writes that Heidegger’s “concept of *Volk* implicates the deconstruction of the contractual subject of modern politics, of representation and discursivity...and with it the deconstruction of Cartesian subjectivity, as the metaphysical basis of the collective subject of modern nationality and the modern state.”<sup>9</sup>

As stated earlier, Radloff’s philological approach is broad and deep, and it parses and interrogates selections of Heidegger’s publications and lectures within the context of the National Socialist project. Since one of the book’s major premises is the relevance of Heidegger’s critique of technological determinism for contemporary scholars, the first chapter takes a wide panoramic view by revisiting Heidegger’s concept of planet within the discourses of modern science. Chapter Three is most relevant to the

book's title and discusses Heidegger's formulations of *Gestalt* in the context of the German conservative revolution, the last days of the Weimar Republic, and the early days of Nazi ascendancy. Chapters Five and Seven offer, in turn, an analysis of the political dimensions of Heidegger's lectures and an interrogation of the roles that art, politics, and technology contribute to Heidegger's rejection of the National Socialist misinterpretation of *Volk*. Radloff also notes that post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida adopted and modified the "deconstructive" approach that Heidegger established in *Sein und Zeit* and that his reputation as major philosopher has been "rehabilitated" by "postmodern thinkers such as Foucault, Baudrillard and Paul Virilio [who] have taken up Heidegger's phenomenology of the disintegration of the modern subject and Enlightenment project in specific and fruitful interrogations of their own."<sup>10</sup>

Discussing several of Richard Polt's critiques of Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism, Radloff rejects the notion that *Sein und Zeit* is a "crypto-fascist" work that established a "political ontology" for the Nazi appropriation of power. Arguing that the philosopher's actions are at least comprehensible, in view of other options open to him in Germany of 1933, Radloff acknowledges that Heidegger succumbed to National Socialism because he was "under the sway" of a metaphysics of presence implicit in his own work. Such solipsism in the face of the German National Socialist Party's record of atrocity will be difficult for some to reconcile, but indeed a large number of the German populace did not comprehend the full scope and scale of the Nazi concentration camps and mass killings until the Nuremberg Trials brought to light the systematic program of death that their leaders and followers had perpetrated. Companion volumes readers may wish to consult when reading Radloff's study include Hans Sluga's *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (1993) and *Heidegger et le nazisme* by Victor Farias (1987).

Heidegger's relationship with the Nazis illustrates the gray, tragic tones of history. He rejected the racial element of the party's philosophy and was sobered by the calculated violence of the Night of the Long Knives in the summer of 1934, in which Hitler liquidated his perceived political enemies. His break with Husserl, who was of Jewish origin but converted to Christianity and retired in 1928, predated the Third Reich's decree which terminated the employment of Jewish professors; under Nazi pressure, however, Heidegger removed a dedication to Husserl from a later volume of *Sein und Zeit*. He resigned the rectorship at Freiburg in April of 1934, after *apparatchiks* of National Socialist ideology treated his philosophical writings with ridicule and contempt, but he did not resign as a party member until 1945 when Russian and Allied forces occupied Berlin. Heidegger underwent an official period of "denazification" and was not allowed to teach in Germany until 1951 (although he did deliver the occasional public lecture).

In many ways, Radloff's study attempts a similar philological exercise. By discussing Heidegger's thought in the context of the National Socialist project of the early twentieth century, Radloff's book provides the

means to evaluate whether or not Heidegger's phenomenology can transcend the constraints of time and place, and prove relevant to the global issues regarding technology, environment, and humanity confronting scholars in the early twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. MacQuarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1.
2. Martin Heidegger, "The Self Assertion of the German University," in Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering, eds., *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 5-13.
3. Bernhard Radloff, *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 427.
4. Martin Heidegger, quoted in Radloff, *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism*, 90.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Martin Heidegger, quoted in Stuart Elden, *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London: Continuum, 2001), 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 37.
8. Martin Heidegger, quoted in Christian Delacampagne, *A History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 2001), 142.
9. Radloff, *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism*, 176-177.
10. *Ibid.*, 34.