

The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader. Edited by Richard Wolin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. Pp. 315. \$35.00.

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Most critics agree that Richard Wagner's music has little to do with his political beliefs, that it should be judged on its merit, apart from the maestro's avowed anti-Semitism and the prominent place his music was accorded in Hitler's Germany. But what about Martin Heidegger's philosophy? How much weight should we give to his ill-fated involvement with National Socialism? Does existentialism spell fascism?

Richard Wolin has assembled a collection of materials bearing on these fascinating questions. In particular, he makes available to American readers postwar debates in Germany and an account of the controversy over Heidegger's legacy that stirred France in the 1980s after Victor Farias published his provocative study *Heidegger and Nazism*. The author also offers a discussion of his own, where he skillfully navigates between the two extremes, one equating Heidegger's existentialism with

Nazism and the other exonerating his philosophy as inimical to the Nazi spirit.

The first issue that needs to be addressed concerns Heidegger's culpability for Nazi crimes. The case against the German philosopher can be summed up as follows. Heidegger greeted National Socialism as a "great awakening," heralding its role as a movement destined to reverse Europe's precipitous decline. He supported the *Gleichschaltung* legislation that barred Jews from the German Civil Service, distanced himself from his Jewish students during the Nazi years, and allowed the 1941 editions of *Being and Time* to appear without the original dedication to his non-Aryan teacher, Edmund Husserl. Declaring that the "Führer alone is the present and future of German reality and its law," Heidegger spurned academic freedom as license to avoid responsibility and juxtaposed to it freely chosen commitment to National Socialism. In 1933, Heidegger accepted the rectorship at the University of Freiburg; in this position he tolerated, if not encouraged, the repression of liberal faculty members and made numerous speeches exhorting students to embrace fascist ideals. His lifelong association with prominent Nazi figures such as Eugene Fisher, the founder of the Institute for Racial Hygiene, also bespeaks Heidegger's identification with the Nazi cause.

These gruesome facts notwithstanding, the case against Heidegger is not cut-and-dried. Heidegger resigned his rectorship after 10 months in order, he later insisted, to show his displeasure with the Nazi pressure to replace undesirable deans with party faithfuls. Nor was he entirely unsympathetic to the plight of Jews. The dedication to Husserl appeared every time his magnum opus was reprinted, except in 1941, when Heidegger agreed to drop it (although not the crucial footnote acknowledging his debt to Husserl), and then only after he was led to believe that the new edition might otherwise be suppressed. As he pointed out in his 1966 interview for *Der Spiegel*, he had forbidden book burning on campus, declined to hail Hitler as German professors were expected to do in their classes, and from the mid-30s on offered a thinly disguised critique of Nazi racial philosophy. His dissenting views apparently irked the Nazi officials, who tried to block his publications, hindered his travel abroad, and finally drafted the aging professor along with other "dispensable faculty" into the *Volkssturm* in the waning days of World War II.

In spite of these mitigating circumstances, the Denazification Committee did the right thing when it barred Heidegger from teaching for five years (although he was given a pension that allowed him to continue his philosophical work). The most damning evidence against Heidegger is not what he did during the Nazi years, but what he did not do after the war. He never openly condemned the Nazi atrocities. Nor did he acknowledge that there was anything wrong with National Socialism as an idea, whose "inner truth and greatness" he praised as late as 1952. National Socialism, Heidegger reasoned, simply failed to live up to its true potential; it was thwarted by rabid racists who blocked the nobler, spiritual course charted by Heidegger in his rectoral address. Heidegger's

moral instincts failed him completely when he equated Hitler's Germany with Roosevelt's America. Each side sinned against truth and practiced terror, he lamented; both succumbed to modernity with its relentless drive to rationalize the world, to subjugate nature, to mechanize human existence.

I found Heidegger's philippics against pragmatism, which Heidegger equated with crass positivism, particularly revealing. Along with many of his contemporaries, Heidegger dismissed pragmatism as "the most barren Americanism, according to whose fundamental principle that is true which succeeds." This sentiment is ironic, for many insights central to Heidegger's project—radical historicism, ontological uncertainty, political commitment, the need to balance public order with individual self-expression—are clearly adumbrated by American pragmatists. James, Dewey, and Mead would develop similar themes, but to what a profoundly different effect—which brings us back to the elective affinity between existentialism and fascism.

To the extent that the question of meaning boils down to the question of means, Heidegger's teaching has to be judged a sinister affair, for the means he chose to fill his philosophical abstractions with concrete historical sense were ugly indeed. Then there is his programmatic commitment to irrationalism, antihumanism, and antimodernism that does in retrospect seem to dovetail with certain Nazi practices. Still, I do not believe that Heidegger's existentialism, to say nothing of the existentialism championed by Kierkegaard and Sartre, is inherently conservative and anti-democratic. Too multivocal to lend itself to an unambiguous political rendering, it does have a humanistic potential that was revealed by American pragmatists who whittled away at some of the same sources that nourished existentialists. There are many factors that help account for the democratic route pragmatists chose to travel, including their tolerance, compassion, and ambivalence—the very humanism that Heidegger spurned as flabby nihilism and that he was determined to transcend through his hard-boiled "will-to-power." A formidable intellect, he proved deficient in intelligence—that practical faculty which balances our capacity to reason with our ability to feel, to empathize.

Richard Wolin has assembled an important volume that should attract not only scholars interested in Heidegger but also a wide range of practicing sociologists. Students of the Nazi era, sociologists of knowledge, scholars involved in the nascent trans-Atlantic dialogue, even ethnomethodologists interested in glossing over techniques and strategic accounting will find this engrossing, rewarding reading. I highly recommend this book to the sociological community.