Some topics seem to be complex enough to engender not only one but several big controversies. The relation between Heidegger, his philosophy and National Socialism is such a topic. For a while now we have been witnessing the fourth Heidegger debate since 1945, with contributions mainly in French and German newspapers and magazines. It was kicked off by Emmanuel Faye’s voluminous study *Heidegger. L’introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie*, published in France last year.

By now, dozens of written interventions have appeared, some of them applauding Faye’s sustained attack on Heidegger’s philosophy, others launching a counter-attack in defense of a philosopher widely regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century.

What is it about Faye’s book that has caused so much excitement? First of all, it is the radicality of its central claim: not only was Heidegger a Nazi, his whole philosophy is permeated by National Socialism. Therefore, Heidegger cannot be regarded as a great thinker; in fact, he should not be regarded as a thinker at all (p. 516).

Hence the intellectual turmoil, and hence the dramatization Faye initiates beginning with the preface: he sees himself as engaged in a struggle against the propagation of Nazism and Hitlerism in the realm of thought, a struggle that is still ongoing and on which the future of the human species depends (p. 7).

Despite this somewhat agitated tone and the at times polemical character of Faye’s argument, it should be stressed at the outset that—contrary to some accusations—the book is not a pamphlet but the outcome of several years of extensive and serious research.

Faye tries to justify his thesis that Heidegger subjected philosophy to the political aim of legitimizing National Socialism by citing a huge amount of published and unpublished writings, most of them already known—mainly speeches, seminars and courses that until now have only been available in German (especially in volumes 16, 36/37 and 38 of the so-called Gesamtausgabe).[2] In addition, Faye analyzes two unpublished seminars: “Über Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat” (Wintersemester 1933-34) and: “Hegel, über den Staat” (which Heidegger taught together with Erik Wolf in Wintersemester 1934-35). Faye intends to go beyond the much discussed works of Victor Farias and Hugo Ott by tightly linking philosophical critique and historical investigation (p. 9).[3] According to Faye, “l’affaire Heidegger” does not consist in the political engagement of a man who was temporarily deluded and whose work was...
Chapter 2 documents how Heidegger, as rector of Freiburg University, actively participated in the implementation of the university’s new antisemitic regulations, via the introduction of the Führerprinzip and in Gleichschaltung. During his rectorship, Heidegger’s aim was not to save some of the university’s autonomy from political influence, but on the contrary to advance the Selbstbehauptung of the newly politicized university by participating in the National Socialist revolution. As chapter 3 shows, Heidegger’s resignation from his post as rector of Freiburg University did not mark the end of his engagement with National Socialism. He continued to invoke and promulgate the new Kampf- und Erziehungs-gemeinschaft, the Arbeitslager and Volksgesundheit. In chapter 4, Faye analyzes Heidegger’s course on logic (Sommersemester 1934, published in vol. 38 of the Gesamtausgabe), which is a prime example of the way Heidegger engaged in the indoctrination of his students. Chapter 5 focuses on the unpublished course “Über Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat,” the publication of which is apparently not planned in the Gesamtausgabe. The way in which Heidegger himself identifies the relationship between Sein und Seiendes with the relationship between state and people leads Faye to the general conclusion that the true meaning of Heidegger’s central philosophical concepts can only be understood in relation to National Socialism—there is no Heideggerian philosophy that exists independently from its implication in Nazism (p. 242). In chapter 6, Heidegger’s relation to Carl Schmitt and Alfred Bäumler is portrayed, especially with regard to their critique of the liberal conception of politics and their own conception of the distinction between friend and enemy. In this context, Faye confronts the reader with one of the most repulsive quotes from Heidegger, in which he calls for the total destruction (Vernichtung) of the enemy. Chapter 7 introduces the legal scholar Erik Wolf as a close ally of Heidegger’s pro-Nazi politics at Freiburg and chapter 8 turns to the unpublished seminar the two of them taught on “Hegel, über den Staat.” The last chapter focuses on the later Heidegger’s philosophy, which Faye interprets as a “négotiationnisme ontologique” (p. 491), an attempt to exculpate himself and the whole Nazi project by means of a grandiose theory of the planetary reign of technology and contemporary nihilism. (National Socialism, for the later Heidegger, was merely another manifestation of this nihilism to which it initially seemed a radical alternative.)

Faye’s purpose in the book is to confront the reader with a moral and intellectual choice: either one fights
against the continuation of Nazism and Hitlerism in the realm of thought or one accepts it (p. 497). It is certainly true that a sustained intellectual and political effort has to be directed against revisionist writers who attempt to excuse and downplay or (even worse) provide a justification for Heidegger’s engagement with National Socialism. However, Faye’s simple alternative and his call for the reshelving of Heidegger’s works from philosophy to history libraries seem to miss the complexity of the case. [9] A specialist on Descartes and Renaissance humanism, and himself a staunch rationalist, Faye sees Heidegger’s philosophical critique of Cartesianism and modern rationalism merely as an ideological mask for a perverted politics. Those who adopt elements of Heidegger’s critique are dubbed politically naïve or, worse, suspect—a judgment Faye passes on Derrida and even Habermas without further ado. One wonders what Faye would have said to some of the most prominent of Heidegger’s students, like Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Herbert Marcuse and Hans Jonas, who continued to be influenced by his work even after 1945. [10]

Faye has succeeded indisputably in collecting and laying out for the reader the documents of Heidegger’s deep involvement with National Socialism. Especially for the French context, his work will be of some importance, since it presents a large amount of material not available in translation before. Of course, this outcome is somewhat less remarkable for those who read German, but the analysis of the two unpublished seminars maps new ground (here it turns out to be of great advantage that all citations are also given in German in the footnotes). However, the reader is left with the ambivalent feeling that Faye’s argument is historically strong but philosophically quite weak, since it never really takes the time necessary to understand the philosophical point and always rushes on to the alleged political subtext. Taking the Heidegger of 1933 as the one, only and true Heidegger leads Faye to view Sein und Zeit as National Socialism in disguise. [11] But to read Heidegger’s National Socialist propaganda back into his philosophy proves to be of little philosophical value. And even if Heidegger himself argued that Dasein is in itself völkisch or German, why should we follow him in this unwarranted claim? [12] At this point it becomes especially evident that Faye tends to save himself the trouble of engaging in the necessary philosophical critique of Heidegger. [13]

More deplorable than these shortcomings, however, are the reactions of some Heideggerians who, once again, have refused to acknowledge the most basic historical facts or who have argued for a naïve distinction between the man and his work. This tendency reaches a depressingly low level with François Fédier’s characterization of Heidegger’s behavior as “irreproachable” and some other contributions to a French website that was launched to counter Faye’s “defamations.” [14] But even more moderate voices, like Catherine Malabou’s, speak of an ideological anti-Heideggerianism and add more fuel to the fire with not very helpful dramatizations like “guerre contre l’intelligence.” [15]

The defenders of rationalism, however, clearly have had their own share in lowering the intellectual level of the debate. With The Seduction of Unreason, Richard Wolin, the arch-modernist of U.S. East Coast liberalism, provides an exemplary case. As the subtitle indicates, after having written extensively on Heidegger, Wolin now intends to uncover the “Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism.” He does so in a series of essays on such diverse thinkers as Nietzsche, C. G. Jung, Gadamer, Bataille, Blanchot and Derrida, complemented by two chapters on the German New Right and the French New Right. But the reader will be inclined to ask what their uniting feature is. Wolin’s answer is straightforward: they are all instantiations of the anti-democratic and anti-rationalist tradition of the Counter-Enlightenment. Unfortunately, Wolin uses the labels “Counter-Enlightenment” and “postmodernism” as Kampfbegriffe that he never clearly defines save by naming the usual suspects listed above (plus, naturally, Heidegger). Their philosophical works are reduced to a critique of reason and truth that Wolin deems intellectually untenable and politically disastrous and portrays as an expression of Western self-hatred and cynicism. Replacing the attempt to understand with the pursuit of his own political agenda—a critique of what he calls the postmodern academic left—Wolin’s essays are filled with overhasty moral judgments and denunciations that cannot but seem rather peculiar to those readers not engaged in the simplifying logic of the U.S. culture wars. [16]

Pleading for “Reason’s Return,” Wolin speaks in the name of universalism, human rights, democracy and all the other good things no one could possibly oppose. There is, however, almost no philosophical argument that takes the positions he attacks seriously, as potential partners in a dialogue; rather, they are discredited from the start. This becomes especially apparent in his critique of Derrida’s and Gadamer’s philosophies. “Truth and Method,” for example, is criticized for not treating human rights as one of its topics. Furthermore, not only does Wolin fail to provide an adequate defense of universalist conceptions of “truth” and “reason,” he also
leaves open in what sense they are the necessary philosophical foundations for democracy.[17] His rhetorical strategy shares similarities with the method of "guilt-by-association" that he claims to avoid, nevertheless producing numerous statements admitting that a philosophical critique of the concepts of reason and truth does not make one a Nazi even as they imply the opposite through their choice of language. However, these criticisms should not obscure the fact that as pieces of intellectual history, some of the chapters (for example the, ones on Bataille and Gadamer) provide interesting insights. As political interventions, however, they seem rather lame and as philosophical arguments they lack substance.

If Faye's thesis–Heidegger's National Socialism is the key to his philosophy–can be situated on one extreme, those who claim that Heidegger's position was not National Socialist, that it even stood in contradiction to National Socialism or at least constituted a "private" version of it, seem to be located on the other extreme.[18] Interestingly, this view has recently been defended mostly by philosophers.[19] The most recent example is provided by James Phillips from the University of Tasmania, who sees Heidegger's engagement with National Socialism as a genuinely philosophical engagement, the basis of which, as Heidegger himself claimed at the time, is provided by his concept of historicity. Since liberalism and democracy rest on the idea of the subject, Heidegger lined up with National Socialism in the task of demolishing the subject in favor of historicity and the Volk. Heidegger's subsequent elaborations on the Volk can then be seen as providing an "immanent critique" of this central concept of National Socialism. According to Phillips, Heidegger came to see that liberalism (the ideas of 1789) and National Socialism (the ideas of 1933) both abstract from historicity and share the same ontological basis. Neither of them was able to think the Dasein—the former dissolved it in an individualist manner, while the latter reified it as something given and certain. Needless to say, this argument is accompanied by numerous assurances that the author does not intend to downplay Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis. The whole line of thought, however, seems to be as historically uninformed as it is philosophically dubious. The problem with the Nazis, from either perspective, is surely not that they were not radical enough or that they were too liberal, too humanist, too wedded to the metaphysics of the subject. Furthermore, Heidegger's critique of "real existierender Nationalsozialismus" was made in the name of what he thought of as the true and authentic National Socialism. Consequently, one does not have to be a liberal in order to have some doubts about how Heidegger's Volk could provide a solution for the problems of contemporary political philosophy.

The contributions to this new round of the Heidegger debate by Faye, Wolin and Phillips do not settle the case in either direction. Neither the prosecution nor the defense provide the decisive piece of evidence, and in fact it is quite unclear what this would look like. Rather, they can be seen as symptoms of an unresolvable puzzle that will continue to engender necessary debates and polemics like the one we are witnessing at the moment: that one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century has been so deeply implicated in the most terrible political enterprise. Heidegger's Fall—in the double sense of fall and case—is not going to come to a close.

Notes


[2]. The scholarly status of the Gesamtausgabe is highly contested, since its editorial policies are extremely obscure. In fact, the way in which access to Heidegger's estate (at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach) is restricted is quite scandalous. This makes it literally impossible to assess the philological accuracy of the available editions. Until 2026 access will be granted on opaque grounds to some researchers and not to others by Hermann Heidegger, who has propounded a rather questionable interpretation of Heidegger's behavior between 1933 and 1945 (see the interview with him at http://www.information-philosophie.de/philosophie/heideggergespraeich.html).


[4]. The thesis that Sein und Zeit makes a direct case


[6]. Most of the relevant documents can be found in Martin Heidegger, *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000). See also Bernd Martin, ed., *Martin Heidegger und das ’Dritte Reich’* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989).


[10]. See Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); on Heidegger especially chapter 7 of this work, entitled “Arbeit Macht Frei: Heidegger as a Philosopher of the German ‘Way.’” Wolin claims, a little too hastily, it seems, that Heidegger’s students were in fact deluded by their old master.


[12]. See Henning Ritter, “Aus dem eigenen Da-