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The Politics of Bodenstaendigkeit: Heidegger’s National Socialism

Charles Bambach has added an important contribution to the growing literature on Heidegger’s involvement with and relationship to National Socialism.[1] Following up on an earlier book that placed Heidegger’s thought in the German historicist tradition, Bambach offers a close reading of Heidegger’s texts both in the immediate historical and political context of the years in which they were written and in the context of Heidegger’s overall project of deconstructing the Western metaphysical tradition of calculative thinking that objectifies beings and transforms all forms of existence into resources to gain mastery over the earth.[2] Avoiding both a prosecutorial or an apologetic approach, Bambach suggests that the question that needs to be answered is not, “was Heidegger a Nazi?” but rather, “what kind of National Socialism did he aspire to establish?” (p. xv). As Hans Sluga had already done to a more limited extent in *Heidegger’s Crisis* (1993), Bambach reads Heidegger in the context of his “dialogues” and “conversations” with many of his völkisch contemporaries, including, most prominently, the Nietzschean philosopher Alfred Baeumler, the anti-Nietzschean educator Ernst Krieck, Nazi philosophers Hans Heyse, Kurt Hildebrandt, and Franz Boehm, as well as a host of minor figures, such as Hans Haertle, a leading functionary of the *Amt Rosenberg*, or Richard and Max Oehler, Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche’s official heirs as the administrators of the nazified Nietzsche Archive in Weimar. Despite their many differences, Heidegger shared with his völkisch contemporaries the conviction that only a Volk rooted in its own earth “can summon the historical energy necessary for embracing and transforming its own destiny” (p. xx). Denying that Heidegger’s philosophy and politics can be easily separated (thereby contradicting not only Heidegger’s own efforts to portray his advocacy of National Socialism in 1933-1934 as the temporary aberration of an apolitical thinker but also the efforts of others to portray him as an opportunist who joined the party out of expediency; not conviction), Bambach identifies “an enduring structure within Heidegger’s work that can provide a meaningful historical context within and against which to read Heidegger’s texts, a context provided by ‘roots’ and ‘autochthony’” (p. 333). Bambach makes a persuasive case that Heidegger’s writings between 1933 and 1945 constituted “a philosophical attempt at geo-politics, a grand metaphysical vision of German destiny based on the notion of a singularly German form of autochthony or rootedness in the earth” (p. xix). To be sure, Heidegger’s philosophical turn that eventually culminated in his idyllic and quiescent postwar philosophy, his critique of the “will to will” and the world-wide reign of techne, and his rethinking of Seinsgeschichte was shaped by “deep and abiding confrontations with National Socialism” as he became increasingly critical of the Nazi Party, its repressive and imperialistic policies, and its racial-biological doctrines (p. xxiv). But the underlying connection between the militantly geopolitical vision of German nationalism and Heidegger’s later eco-poetic, pastoral language of Heimat, Gelassenheit, and man as the “shepherd of being” was never broken.

Although Heidegger changed his interpretation of the “ontological myth of autochthonic rootedness” (p.
Bambach begins by situting Heidegger’s seemingly apolitical philosophical work of the 1920s and early 1930s, including Being and Time (which he reads as Heidegger’s challenge to the ideological “worldview thinking” of both Soviet communism and Western democratic liberalism, “isms” allegedly unable to experience time in an ontological context), in the climate of cultural crisis, national mourning, and fierce political conflict that followed the Great War. The war and the post-war crisis provoked Heidegger’s lifelong project of rethinking and reevaluating the history of Western metaphysics as the history of being. As so many German philosophers and poets before him, Heidegger believed that Germany’s (and Europe’s) spiritual and intellectual salvation lay in recovering the special relationship that linked Germans to the ancient Greeks through language and the concept of autochthony, which Bambach describes not simply as rootedness in the soil, in the past, or in tradition, but rather as signifying “something concealed, mysterious, and chthonic whose meaning lies hidden beneath the surface of the earth, or rather whose meaning needs to be worked out in confrontation (Aus-einander-setzung) with this concealment in order to grant one an authentic identity” (p. 19). But whereas the volkisch intellectuals of the Conservative Revolution appropriated philosophy to carry out a political revolution, Heidegger saw a political revolution as merely the occasion for a far more radical philosophical revolution “to win back or recuperate from the ingrained habits of centuries-long philosophical practice the sense of original wonderment that pervaded early Greek theoria” (p. 23). Heidegger joined the Nazis not, as he and some apologists have claimed, because he saw no other alternative to communism,[3] but because he saw the Nazi Aufbruch as the historical moment for a radical transformation to combat not only the rootlessness of Weimar culture but the rootlessness and “forgetfulness of being” inherent in the entire Western metaphysical tradition. “In this program of ontological politics, a politics that seeks its roots both in the geographical-cultural soil of the homeland and in the philosophical-mythic arche of the Greek dawn, Heidegger will attempt his coup as the philosophical prince of a conservative revolution” (p. 23). His embrace of National Socialism was motivated by his conviction that this revolutionary political transformation would lead to the philosophical retrieval of the Western beginnings in pre-Socratic thought and awareness, a task for which Germany was uniquely suited and the university was the ideal site. Despite the changing fortunes of the Third Reich and his changed attitude toward the Nazi regime, Heidegger never gave up on this task.

At the heart of this book is Heidegger’s (mis)reading of Nietzsche in his Nietzsche lectures from 1936 to 1943, later published in two massive volumes in 1961.[4] His encounter with Nietzsche had been decisive for Heidegger’s philosophical turn toward rethinking the essence of truth in 1929-30 (by recovering the originary pre-Socratic, pre-rational experience of truth as disclosure or unconcealment of being, not as logical certainty or correspondence with reality) as well as for his political commitment to National Socialism in 1933. Read against the background of the Great War as a metaphysical struggle about the meaning of history, Nietzsche’s critique of Platonic values and their post-Christian “enlightened” offshoots served as Heidegger’s guide to what had gone wrong in the Western tradition. Heidegger enthusiastically embraced National Socialism as the Nietzschean counter-movement to the nihilism and vulgarization of modern life (liberal democracy, technical-rational dominion, mass consciousness, the rootlessness of urban life) that appeared to have triumphed in the Great War. Only a Volk committed to its roots could provide a bulwark against the forces of nihilism and reawaken the power of philosophy. But Heidegger’s ambitious goal
was not shared by Nazi officials, with whom he frequently clashed after 1934, not least in his capacity as a member of the commission overseeing the *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe* of Nietzsche’s works. As Heidegger became increasingly disenchanted with the Nazis in the mid-1930s, he again turned to Nietzsche for inspiration in his efforts to bring about the more profound spiritual and metaphysical revolution that he had hoped for and expected. Until 1938 Heidegger read Nietzsche as a comrade in arms against the Nazis for a more authentic form of National Socialism; thereafter, he saw him as “merely a forerunner of the fallen and inessential versions of National Socialism” put forward by the Party and its subservient intellectuals (p. 266). Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the modern crisis remained valid, but his prescribed cure no longer promised a way out. If Nietzschean will to power had previously appeared to Heidegger as the appropriate formula to reverse the course of modern degeneration, it now seemed hopelessly entangled in the very degeneration it was meant to combat. He now came to see Nietzsche not as the herald of the future who had decisively broken with the Platonic tradition, but as the last metaphysician whose doctrine of will to power had merely brought the Western tradition of nihilism (the metaphysical legacy of *Seinsvergessenheit*) to a catastrophic end. An ever more critical reading of Nietzsche eventually turned into a polemic against Nietzsche. Heidegger’s rejection of Nietzsche mirrored his disappointment with the Nazis. As the fortunes of war turned against Germany, Heidegger came to see the Nazi movement not as the counter-movement to modern nihilism, but as its quintessential expression. Even more than communism or Americanism it now embodied for Heidegger the destructive will to technological control and domination that was the legacy of Western metaphysics and the ultimate source of the modern crisis.

In his 1966 *Spiegel* interview, Heidegger had asked (in particular reference to his rectorial address), “Who among those who attack this discourse has read it carefully, thought it through, and interpreted it in terms of the situation at that time?” [5] Bambach has done precisely this, but his conclusions could hardly be more devastating. While Richard Wolin’s *The Politics of Being* (1992) brilliantly exposed the philosophical underpinnings of Heidegger’s National Socialism from an unapologetic Enlightenment perspective quite at variance with Heidegger’s own outlook, Bambach has sought to meet and contest Heidegger on his own philosophical ground. While Wolin viewed Heidegger’s quietistic and fatalistic late philosophy as a disillusioned reaction to his misinterpretation of Nazism (much in the same way as Paul de Man’s deconstructionist literary theory, which denies the possibility of interpretive certainty, has been seen as a “burnt fingers” reaction to his own error of judgment in collaborating with the Nazis during the war), [6] Bambach goes a step further, quite convincingly demonstrating that Heidegger never relinquished the basic commitments that led him to welcome the Nazi revolution in the first place. Although Heidegger always rejected the Nazis’ biological racism, his philosophical defense of the unique Greco-German affinity was equally exclusionary, barring the rootless (a code word also for Jews up to 1945) and non-autochthonous, and thus constituting “a cultural form of racism” (p. 212) that came to determine the very structures of Heideggerian thinking. “What needs to be considered is the deep and abiding connection between Heidegger’s political commitment to an autochthonous German Volk at the center of Europe and his ontological decision to read the history of Western philosophy on the basis of another kind of autochthony—namely, the indigenous, rooted, *sUberteranean* origin of Greek philosophy that ruled over the history of the West” (p. 146). Through his Nietzsche lectures, Heidegger “sought to galvanize National Socialism into an awareness of its historical mission: to win back a sense of rootedness and autochthony for historical *Dasein*” (p. 298). Bambach turns the tables on Heidegger, invoking Nietzsche to critique Heidegger’s interpretation and pointing out the “hermeneutic violence” in Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche (whom he read through the eyes of the George Circle). Heidegger’s “Hoelderlinian dream of establishing a new German future by returning to the essence of the Volk” (p. 93) placed his work at radical odds with Nietzsche, who “never succumbed to Platonic desire for either a pure origin or an origin of purity” (p. 218). Bambach contrasts Nietzsche’s individualistic self-overcoming and his rejection of the “petty politics” of the European state system to Heidegger’s communal affirmation and valorization of mythic Germans. In embracing a messianic National Socialism, Heidegger fell victim to the very presentism that Nietzsche critiqued in the modern world. “To anyone familiar with Nietzsche’s work,” Bambach concludes, “[Heidegger’s] boldly conceived attempt to wed Nietzsche and the thematic of homeland seems wholly misguided” (pp. 303–304). By comparing Heidegger’s lecture notes to the sanitized versions published after the war, Bambach also very effectively exposes Heidegger’s post-war evasive strategies of elision and omission, “a wildly successful ‘cover-up’ of his own political affiliations and views” (p. 248). Yet Bambach remains appreciative of Heidegger’s innovative thought and method, which he explicates with
exemplary meticulousness, even while challenging "the logic of exclusion, privilege, and autochthonic identity that pervades Heidegger’s thought" (p. 324) and calling on philosophers to "challenge at its roots any authorial attempt to provide directives on how to read what is 'there' for thinking" (p. 325).

This is a scintillating work of intellectual history written with an understated eloquence, philosophical depth and subtlety, and close attention to historical detail. No previous book to my knowledge has provided such detailed contextualization of Heidegger’s Denkweg during the Third Reich. This fascinating genealogy of Heidegger’s mythology of being also has a lot to teach us about the appeal of National Socialism and the disconcerting coincidence of high culture and destructivity that has puzzled historians of Germany for so long. The book offers fascinating insights into the right-wing intellectual culture of Weimar Germany, the extraordinary influence of Nietzsche in Nazi Germany, the surprisingly sharp disagreements among Nazi intellectuals after 1933 (not least about how to read Nietzsche), as well as the easy transition of German intellectuals from Nazis to democrats and cold warriors after the war. Although one of the great merits of Heidegger’s Roots is to give the reader an appreciation for how very different the culture in which Heidegger’s philosophy developed was from our own, this book can also profitably be read with an eye on the present. That so high-minded, conscientious, and original a thinker could have been so convinced of the superiority of his own people’s culture and of their mission to save the world, a judgment that turned out to be so terribly wrong, must give us all in twenty-first-century America pause.

Notes


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