

BOOK PANEL¹

Bernhard Radloff's *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)

THE WAR HAS TAKEN PLACE

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I. The Problem

It was through his phenomenological works of the 1920s, especially *Being and Time* (hereafter referred to as *BT*), that Heidegger first became known to a worldwide public. The works belonged to a high academic tradition, offering rigorous treatments of such themes as being, truth, language, logic, knowledge, time and history, with an impeccable heritage comprising not only the current phenomenological movement but the whole philosophical tradition from the ancient Greeks up to the neo-Kantian school. Yet, the other mark of his work was its closeness to life. Heidegger's being was something that we all understood in the course of our existential experiences; time was revealed, not as an abstract coordinate of physics, but as unveiled in Everyman's race toward death; the problem of knowledge was not focussed mainly on scientific practice but on our access to the everyday environments of our being-in-the-world. So, Heidegger stood out as the least remote of academics, and this awakened excitement. Heidegger's second appearance in the world at large began with his *Letter on "Humanism"* in 1947, and here we experienced a meditative closeness to being, and we read a poetic word that seemed to resound in everyone's heart. He gained a still greater hold on his wide following.

All this was reason enough for shock at discovering that Heidegger

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had been an active National Socialist. This revelation emerged only by degrees, yet became ever more clear after the 1940s. And here is a matter that has often been raised in recent years. Often we hear it asked, Why is it Heidegger in particular who becomes singled out for blame as a Nazi when there were scores of other philosophers, and hundreds of academics, and thousands of other prominent people, who compromised themselves with the Nazis? The reason Heidegger is singled out is not merely malice on the part of his accusers. The shock arose because Heidegger's philosophical achievement otherwise seemed so great, and because it was so attractive to many of us. If it was utterly besmirched by this association, then **so were we!**

This problem generated a huge literature, with many varying interpretations. The latest and best of them is Bernhard Radloff's *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt*.² Radloff gives a quick schema (HQNS, 115— it's due to Richard Polt) of the different lines that have been taken by commentators, but here we ought, obviously, to single out the one that is most drastic and damaging—Tom Rockmore's view that the whole of Heidegger's work is drenched in Nazism through and through. This is so disconcerting because of the credence that Heidegger earned from us owing to the qualities of his work. Can it be that the work exudes Nazism so as to come to infect its readers? That is why the cry became heard that one could not now read Heidegger.

That is indeed the unstated implication of Rockmore's book, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy*.³ He bases his study on the concept of a "concealed" Nazism (HNP, 15–27), which accompanies the apparent or manifest meaning of the texts, a cargo that one receives—perhaps not consciously—while reading the accounts of being, truth, history and so on. "[T]he intrinsic political dimension of his theory of Being has not so far been clearly seen." (*Ibid.*, 18) One illustration of this kind of interpretation appears where Rockmore treats the discussion of history in *BT*, §74. Heidegger says that we must choose our heroes in seeking to appropriate our past and our tradition, but now Rockmore links this text to the

² Bernhard Radloff, *Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HQNS.

³ Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HNP.

cult of the Nazis' hero Schlageter, whom Heidegger revered. (HNP, 48)

Since Nazism claimed to embody the values of the authentic German, of the German *Volk* as German, there is, then, a profound parallel, providing for an easy transition without any compromise of basic philosophical principles, between Heidegger's conception of authenticity through resoluteness and National Socialism. (HNP, 47)

This "profound parallel," this "easy transition" without "compromise," are the hermeneutical principles that operate through the whole book.

I do not see a difference in principle between Rockmore's study and that of Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being*,⁴ whose title can be elucidated, perhaps, through the instance of his treatment of conscience in *BT*. Heidegger refrains from listing the contents of the call of conscience: conscience does not tell us what to do. Wolin finds this doctrine to be mystical and elitist, but, worse, proto-Nazi. Since it apparently denies that people can govern themselves, it opens up the space for the authoritarian commands of the *Führer*. (PB, 40–6) Both these books read like the work of prosecuting attorneys who believe they have Heidegger in the dock.

More recently, I've read the book by Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger : L'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie : Autour des séminaires inédits de 1933–1935*.⁵ The focus is on unpublished seminars, one from winter semester 1933–34,⁶ the other from winter semester 1934–35.⁷ I notice a considerable difference between the reports of the two seminars: the earlier one connected *Volk* to race and blood (Séminaires, 195); the later one avoided such talk and appears to be merely a sober analysis of the Hegelian concept of the state. (*Ibid.*, 349–50). Nevertheless, Faye notes no change in Heidegger's thinking over the intervening

⁴ Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PB.

⁵ Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger : L'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie : Autour des séminaires inédits de 1933–1935* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2005). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as Séminaires.

⁶ Its title was *Über Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat*. (Séminaires, 187)

⁷ Its title was *Hegel, über den Staat*. (Séminaires, 333).

year—both seminars are described as nauseating and odious in their Nazi commitment. This illustrates the general character of his book. Everything Heidegger did, whether in the 1920s or in later years after the Rectorate, is treated indifferently as pure Nazism. Moreover, other persons belonging to the Nazi movement are always introduced irrelevantly in association with the Heidegger texts. Thus Faye refers here to *BT* only as an illustration of the racism of somebody called Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß (*Ibid.*, 34–9)—contrived and unconvincing in the extreme—and this same section is then filled out with lengthy quotations from Erich Rothacker.

Now, we must turn to Radloff. His key contribution is to establish a number of **mediating factors** that lie between the actual philosophy of Heidegger and the politics of Nazism to which he so unfortunately committed himself. Radloff identifies a set of themes that constitute Heidegger's philosophy as such, and above all, this is the account of being, what Radloff calls the "differentiation of being." Then he shows us a number of themes found in the whole discourse of the Weimar age, for instance, *Volk*, the state, leadership and order of rank. And there was one strong discursive or ideological movement that linked these themes together, the so-called "Conservative Revolution," a movement that was not the same as National Socialism, though it flourished at the same time. It embraced some figures who stood apart from National Socialism, for instance, Ernst Jünger, and some who joined it, for instance, Carl Schmitt. Now the point is that the discourse of the Conservative Revolution entered into Heidegger's speeches and communications at the time of his Nazi adventure; that is why we may call its themes mediating factors.⁸ But the very difference between philosophy as such and this discourse or ideology is the basic topic and framework of Radloff's book. My commentary will seek to build on that point and reinforce it. One question I shall take up at the end is whether the mediating factors operated only in the speeches and communications of Heidegger at this time, or whether they were also operative in the politics itself, his actual political choice to be a Nazi.

⁸ My treatment is indebted to J.-P. Sartre's *Search for a Method*, which discussed the "problem of mediation" as a contribution to rectifying what was reductive in Marxian materialism. Sartre's own work was focussed on Gustave Flaubert.

II. Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism

The book opens with a diagnosis of modernity in the West, built around what the author calls “formlessness.” This signifies the erosion of every inherited institution, the merger of the state into society and economy, for instance, education disappearing into personnel processing, and the merger of reality itself into the virtual reality of post-modernism. In Radloff’s diagnosis we already discern themes taken from the Conservative movements of an earlier Germany. And just as the book opens with a critique of our Western culture, it closes with a vision of the empty world-empire now commanded by a nihilistic West, a movement of globalism that is in the course of obliterating every semblance of differentiated cultures on the planet. He links this vision more closely than Heidegger did with the imperialism of Britain that was guided by an aggressive empiricism, with Lord Bacon defined as the prototypical commander of politics and learning both. With this vision of our present life under the regime of *Ge-Stell*, we are ready to explore the alternatives that earlier German intellectuals may have offered.

The central idea here is called *Gestalt*, which is presented as the kind of form that has vanished in the age of formlessness. This idea was central to the German culture of the 1920s and found an echo in the thought of Heidegger, and I see it as the first of the themes that mediate between the philosophy of Heidegger and the ideology of Nazism. *Gestalt* was prominent in the psychology of the day, and also many sciences, not least biology; and beyond that, a key principle for the analysis of society and politics. Indeed, it was a central metaphysical principle, traceable in Goethe, and in the 20th century, in Ernst Jünger. Recovery of *Gestalt*, then, might have been the deepest need of modernity. It is now a central task for Radloff to demonstrate the yearning for *Gestalt* both in the Conservative Revolution and in the work of Heidegger. As for Heidegger, Radloff concedes (HQNS, 28) that the term is not found in *BT*, and is criticised elsewhere (*Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 1927) for its metaphysical associations. But he is able to find it at crucial points in many other texts (see HQNS, 44, 48, for instance), and, what is central to his argument, the theme of *Gestalt* is only one index for Heidegger’s deepest thought, the differentiation of being.

There is very little about *BT* in this book (the same is true of Rockmore), which I think is due to the recognition that this work has

nothing to do with National Socialism. The brief section here on *BT* is confined to Heidegger's view of rhetoric, which draws on Aristotle, serving as an entrée into the rhetoric that Heidegger himself practised in his Rectoral address.

In that address of 1933, *The Self-Assertion of the German University*, the crucial concept that links Heidegger to Nazism is that of the *Volk*, a second mediating factor. But Radloff draws out a major difference. His interpretation of the Rectoral address stresses very strongly an Aristotelian background, showing how, in its way of being, a *Volk* brings itself to actualisation—it is “not the unity of a collective will (Rousseau), nor the contractual unity of individual wills (Locke), but a movement of self-reserve and actualized self-differentiation (*dunamis*...)...” (HQNS, 106) By the principle of *dunamis* we see the darkness and withdrawal proper to a *Volk*, its self-hiding or mystery. This idea will be further developed in Radloff's account of Heidegger's philosophy lectures of 1933 and 1934. In the *Logic* lectures of summer 1934, we see that the *Volk* is a “movement of withdrawal from objectification.” (HQNS, 174ff.) It cannot be represented as a race or as a biological type or value. The negative aspect of this *dunamis* is also expressed by the necessary limits proper to a *Volk* and also in the limitation of a principle of identity: the identity of a *Volk* is marked through and through by differentiation. (HQNS, 198ff.) On page 92, Radloff also mentions the sharp polemic that Heidegger offered in his lectures of the winter semester 1933–34⁹ against the racialist theories of the visiting Nazi official Kolbenheyer: racial, biological theory falsely objectifies a *Volk*.

This does not mean that Heidegger denies the being of the *Volk*, but if we summarise the place of the *Volk* within Conservative Revolutionary discourse, we can see how Heidegger differs. (GA 36/37, 111–72) While Heidegger's discourses employed some of the conservatives' language, his actual philosophy has an independent stature, drawing on other wellsprings of thought. The conservatives' idea of *Volk* was central to their thought, but in different representatives it moves confusingly between material, biological theories (Darré) and cultural, spiritual ones (Krieck), with a mixture of motives in other writers. Heidegger would link it most of all to history and language. This was always anti-

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, 36/37 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2001), 209–13. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as GA 36/37.

international; in Heidegger, it becomes the self-limitation of the *Volk*. The principled anti-Semitism common in conservative circles does not really appear in Heidegger, though he seems to have made isolated remarks of that character.

Another mediating concept is the state. The will to create a state, or even *Reich*, was attributed to the *Volk*, and most authors recognised the federal principle as normative for Germany. Ecology was a major element in conservative thought, and shows up in Heidegger's critique of technology. Heidegger disputed the commonly invoked idea of a German *Weltanschauung*. Another concept is leadership. Heidegger's characteristic modification of the cult of leadership was to insist upon science, *Wissenschaft*, or even philosophy, or the university, as the authentic bearer of leadership—not an idea common to the conservatives, and certainly not to the Sturm Abteilung (SA) or the Nazi Party generally. Of course, it proved to be unrealistic.

Two major chapters complete the picture of Heidegger, one on the *Introduction to Metaphysics* of 1935, and one on the *Beiträge* of two or three years later. In both, we see the dominant theme of being, i.e., the **differentiation** of being, that is distinctively Heidegger's; in both, we see that Heidegger is able to make use of conservative discourse while philosophising; in both, we see a clear distance from National Socialist ideology.

III. Differentiation and *Gestalt*

It is time to review the deeper ontological substructure in Radloff's book. The book's introduction lays out a conception of *Gestalt* that is to serve, not only in psychology and related sciences, and not only in the discourse of the conservative revolution, but in Heidegger's ontology as well. It does not merely differentiate species from species, and it does not merely define order and rank in society—it constitutes the very being of beings, so that to be is to take on *Gestalt*. (HQNS, 48). That is why limit is central to being (*Ibid.*, 9): "...the event of presencing in its coming to stand in a being, thus to presence out of the limit proper to it." We are to see here a non-metaphysical concept of *Gestalt*—but what are the features that differentiate that from the more normal tradition regarding *Gestalt*? The movement that interests Heidegger includes the withdrawal of the *Gestalt*-laden entity (*Ibid.*, 26), so that the actual *Gestalt* is not that of

the entity at all but of its being. (*Ibid.*, 30) *Gestalt* is not, therefore, to be captured in an image or as an image. (*Ibid.*, 43–45) The temporality or historicity of being itself is the bearer of *Gestalt*. It is at this point that we make transition to the still deeper theme of difference.

As we see in the *Beiträge*, “the presencing of being implicates the distinction between *Seyn* and *Sein*.” (HQNS, 48) However, for my part, I think we should first recognise that *Sein* [without “y”] serves to constitute the framework for metaphysics that is not understood by metaphysics itself, namely, the ontological difference where *Sein* stands over against *Seiendes*. In this difference, metaphysical thought conceives *Sein* as the general, the character of being a being, which Heidegger writes as *Seiendheit*. It is where we look beyond metaphysics, in the “other beginning,” that we free *Sein* from that difference, that contrast, i.e., forget about beings altogether. That is *Seyn*, with a y. Thus it is not strictly true that *Seyn* is different from *Sein*, and I think Radloff could rewrite pages 48–50 without invoking a difference here. The withdrawal of *Sein* or *Seyn* from the ontological difference is the *Seinsverlassenheit* that afflicts all beings and the world, and that constitutes our present age. It is what makes it possible and necessary for us now to think be-ing (*Seyn*). The withdrawal, hiding, oblivion of being is the innermost character of “the differentiation of being.” Now the question can be put: With this more drastic sense of difference, is there is any *Gestalt* at all in being? Is it not rather an unending fleeing from all *Gestalt*, inherently formless, therefore, and sublime? Certainly, it is the refusal of the normal metaphysical *Gestalt*. We can approach this question by examining Radloff’s study of the three main texts: the Rectoral address, *Introduction to Metaphysics* and the *Beiträge*.

We already quoted Radloff to the effect that, in the Rectoral address (and in the *Logic* lectures of 1934), the *Volk* is not a present, substantial reality as it was in Rousseau, but “a movement of self-reserve and actualized self-differentiation.” (HQNS, 106) Such is the being of the *Volk*, and yet there is the further movement whereby the very hiding and recession come into the open, the manifestation of the concealment itself. As I read the address, that is the self-knowledge of the *Volk* that is accomplished by the state. This gives us warrant for calling it a *Gestalt*. And this is contrary to the Nazi understanding of *Volk*. “Because the being of *Volk*, in Heidegger’s estimation, is a kind of motion it can never be identified with the metaphysical substance of a collective will or with a

‘biological’ and hence ‘racial’ substance.” (*Ibid.*, 106)

As for the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Radloff shows that being is marked off by four differences—from becoming, appearing, thinking and the Ought. (HQNS, 214) Yet, there is an integration that is required here, the “separation to be overcome in the re-integration of being and its four determinations.” (*Ibid.*) Radloff can expound in line with that the politics of this lecture. (*Ibid.*, 221–23) This integrated-and-differentiated understanding of being constitutes a *Gestalt* (*Ibid.*, 225–26), and the result of this is quite at odds with Nazism. “The questions of *Volk*, of work, and of state arise in response to the possibility of giving the presencing of being a site and articulation in beings.” (*Ibid.*, 221) With the current regime of National Socialism, things are different. “Yet as politically reactive, the new regime is conceived as imposing the metaphysical form, or schema, of a ‘value’ system on the reception of nature and history.” (*Ibid.*, 255)

Radloff stresses the accord between the *Beiträge* and “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Their overlap involves precisely the question of *Gestalt*: “Da-sein is the site of the presencing of being, hence the temporal site of the in-corporation of being in works of art.” (HQNS, 321) Thus, *Da-sein* has “the power of sheltering truth in the granting of *Gestalt* to beings.” (*Ibid.*, 322; see also 326–27) Above all, this is accomplished in the work of art (though Heidegger also stresses politics here). The co-involvement of earth and world in the Artwork essay is amplified in all Heidegger’s later thought as the event of withdrawal and unconcealment. The unity of this event is *Gestalt*-like and if this point is pursued further into politics, we see that the *Volk* is subordinated to the *Da*, the There, that comes to a stand in the work. (*Ibid.*, 325)

IV. Citizen Heidegger

In agreement with Radloff, I have been distinguishing the themes of Heidegger’s actual philosophy from the “mediating factors,” the themes that linked him to the Conservative Revolution and that turned up in his own speeches in the rectoral period, especially *Volk* but also allied ideas such as *Kampf* and *Führer*. But there remains a vitally important point yet to be made. The question, “What made Heidegger become a Nazi?” is not yet answered by reference to the mediating themes. It is not that there is a continuing slide from the fundamental ontology to the mediating

themes, to the option for Nazism. His political choice was not really determined by any discursive factors, but by his appraisal of the current circumstances of Germany. Here, I stray into the domain of history and biography, and can only express my judgment on the basis of what I have read myself.

In the volume *The Heidegger Case*, Otto Pöggeler quotes from a notebook of Hermann Mörchen, Heidegger's student, who visited with Heidegger at the end of 1931:

Heidegger and his wife had become National Socialists. "He does not understand much about politics. And therefore it was especially his disdain for mediocrity and for doing things by half measures that made him expect something from the Party, which had promised to do something decisive and to contradict communism effectively."¹⁰

Fourteen months earlier, in September 1930, the Nazis had had their "breakthrough" election: their representation in the Reichstag had increased eightfold, with over six million votes as against 800,000 in the previous election; with 107 seats, they were now in second place after the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Eight months later, July 1932, their returns were to double once again to 230 seats and in this election (July 1932), the voters' turnout increased by 4 million, especially with a huge surge of youth voters, now putting the Nazis in the lead in the Reichstag. This is the movement of opinion that is also expressed in the words Mörchen quoted from Heidegger in 1931. The Nazis fell slightly in November 1932, but in January 1933 they were able to form a government, and with support from the "Conservatives," they had over 50 per cent of the vote in Germany's last election in March 1933. The explanations of Hitler's appeal that historians have offered (Kershaw, Bullock, Ferguson, Winkler) are well-suited to the particular case of Heidegger as well, and I do not have the space here to rehearse the well-known tale. Near the beginning of the *Spiegel*-interview (published posthumously in May 1976), Heidegger describes his motivations during the winter of 1932–33:

¹⁰ T. Rockmore and J. Margolis, eds., *The Heidegger Case* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 133.

..My neighbor, Professor von Möllendorf, was chosen Rector. The installation of the new Rector here takes place on April 15. During the winter semester of 1932–33, we discussed the [current] situation often, not only the political one, but especially that of the universities and the partially hopeless situation of the students. My judgment went like this: to the extent that I can judge things, the only possibility still available [to us] is to try to seize upon the approaching developments with those constructive forces that still remain alive.¹¹

There is no reason to submit this statement to doubt. My question here has not been why or how Heidegger assumed the Rectorate (on which there's much controversy, with detailed information from Hugo Ott), but why his political preference went to the Nazis.

Historians are used to asking questions like that, and philosophers need to acquire the discipline of the historical point of view. My quotations from Mörchen and the *Spiegel* interview (to be sure, only tiny bits of evidence from an immense mass full of conflict) lead me to differentiate a third element in Heidegger's situation along with his philosophical thought and the ideological discourse that affected him: the awareness that a citizen has of the state of his country, economic, political and otherwise. As Mörchen says, Heidegger had minimal talent in political analysis, of course, but I suppose his millions of contemporaries were not much wiser. I am saying that Martin and Elfride Heidegger were carried along by a popular wave, motivated by the appalling circumstances of Germany at the time. The thinker who will want to be the leader of university renewal in 1933 was really just a follower in politics in 1931. I have tried to show something common and pedestrian in this matter to make more comprehensible the choice that Citizen Heidegger made. That is a choice that I, too, could have made.

The non-historical way of thought tends to see that choice in a completely different way—as pertaining to an essentialised Nazism, the domain of evil. This was above all the way of thought that was called for by our total mobilisation in World War II. But the war has taken place,

¹¹ In Thomas Sheehan, *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), 46.

and after the war it is necessary to become a historian once more, to discern differences. To think in the fashion of total mobilisation has the consequence that the **philosophy** of Heidegger becomes merged into the one black box of unconditional evil, and so does the mediating discourse of the Conservative Revolution. But if we are going to think like philosophers, as well as historians, we need to discriminate between these things.