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A Normal Nazi

By [Thomas Sheehan](#)

The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader

edited by Richard Wolin

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Martin Heidegger: Politik und Geschichte im Leben und Denken (Martin Heidegger: Politics and History in His Life and Thought)

by Ernst Nolte

Propyläen, 330 pp., 48 DM

"People haven't been very nice to me."

Martin Heidegger,
September 18, 1969

1.

In 1987 Victor Fariás's *Heidegger et le nazisme* dropped like a bomb on the quiet chapel where Heidegger's disciples were gathered, and blew the place to bits. The myth Heidegger had concocted after the war—that he supported the Nazis briefly and only to protect the university—was shattered by the evidence Fariás mustered of Heidegger's deep and long-lasting commitment to National Socialism, his blatant anti-Semitism, his blackballing of colleagues for no more than holding pacifist convictions, associating with Jews, or being "unfavorably disposed" toward the Nazi regime.

Badly shaken, the Heideggerian faithful struggled to piece their beliefs together again. Strategies for coping with this new and damning information ranged from partial disclaimers ("Yes, he joined the Party in 1933 but went into opposition soon after") to exculpatory incantations ("Metaphysics made him do it"). When a few months later a second bomb fell—Hugo Ott's *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Campus Verlag, 1988)—the strategy quickly shifted to triage: "Admit the Nazism, but save the philosophy!"^[1]

The official apologists of the Heidegger church insist that the causes of Heidegger's "political error" were ultimately metaphysical and that virtually no one is yet capable of understanding, much less judging, the matter. This claim has something to do with the fate of Professor Richard Wolin's edited collection, *The Heidegger Controversy*. Why did Columbia University Press stop publishing the book, especially when it had sold so well during its brief four months of life? The answer is not simple, but it begins with the objections to the book by Jacques Derrida.

The Heidegger Controversy, which Wolin presents as a complement to his monograph on Heidegger, *The Politics of Being* (Columbia University Press, 1990), is a useful collection of Heidegger's Nazi speeches from the Thirties and of his later efforts at explaining his actions. These are accompanied by relevant essays, interviews, and letters by Otto Pöggeler, Karl Löwith, Herbert Marcuse, and others. Among the latter is an interview with Jacques Derrida, entitled "Philosopher's Hell," which *Le Nouvel Observateur* published in 1987 and which it gave Wolin the rights to translate into English.

Wolin's collection was published in October 1991, and soon afterward Derrida chanced upon a copy of it in a New York bookstore. He was not pleased. The problem was not just that Wolin's concluding essay finds Derrida's position "far-fetched and illogical" and guilty of "hermeneutical chicanery" in attributing Heidegger's Nazism to "a surfeit of metaphysical humanism." No, the issue, Derrida claims, is that Wolin's entire book is nothing but "a sneaky war machine" (*une machine de guerre sournoise*) for attacking Heidegger. Imagine Derrida's reaction, then, at finding his 1987 interview translated in the book without his previous knowledge!

Back in Paris, Derrida had his lawyer write a letter to Columbia University Press threatening that if the press dared to reprint the present volume with the interview—which it was planning to do in paperback—Derrida would take action to impound the new edition and suppress the offending pages. The letter made it clear that Derrida claimed the right to take that action against the current edition as well, but restrained himself out of friendship for Columbia University Press—which, it should be noted, publishes translations of a number of Derrida's works.

Wolin immediately wrote Derrida to explain, apologize, and work out a compromise, but he received no reply. When Derrida's threats against the book continued, Wolin decided to omit the interview from the forthcoming paperback edition. However, he insisted on drafting a new preface explaining why the text was missing. Not surprisingly, his new preface, while balanced and professional, turned out to be quite critical of Derrida's actions.

The editors at Columbia, for reasons not hard to divine, asked Wolin to cut his criticisms of Derrida and reduce the new preface to a few innocuous paragraphs. Wolin refused. The press was caught between Wolin's principles and Derrida's threats. After four months of excellent reviews and good sales, Wolin's collection was allowed to go out of print. Wolin withdrew the book rights from Columbia University Press earlier this year and, still pursued by threats from Derrida, has just reissued it with MIT Press—without the interview, but

with the new preface.

Le Nouvel Observateur has always asserted that it owns the rights to the interview it published, but Derrida is now claiming he does. Back in 1990 when the magazine sold Wolin the rights to the English translation, should *Le Nouvel Observateur* or Wolin have checked with Derrida, too? In hindsight, yes. Wolin was ignorant of Derrida's claim at the time and acted in good faith when he proceeded on the basis of the journal's permission, but it is clear Derrida should not be forced to remain in a collection he does not approve of. What is troubling about the incident is that Wolin was willing to drop the interview from the paperback edition as long as he could explain matters in his own words, but he got no support from his publisher in the face of Derrida's threats.

These questions aside, where does Wolin clash substantially with Derrida over the question of Heidegger's politics? There is general agreement among Heideggerians that in 1933–1934, and for some years thereafter, Heidegger was deeply committed politically and philosophically to Nazism—or at least to what Heidegger called its "inner truth and greatness," its promise to overcome Marxism, liberalism, and nihilism, and to stop the global onslaught of technology, which Heidegger believed was disrupting mankind's more "original" and more direct relation with nature.^[12] Heidegger admitted as much. In 1948 he told Herbert Marcuse: "I expected from National Socialism a spiritual renewal of life in its entirety, a reconciliation of social antagonisms and a deliverance of Western existence from the dangers of communism."

But scholars vigorously disagree over whether or to what degree Heidegger ever detached himself from his commitment to National Socialism.^[13] Here much hinges on the importance one attributes to the philosophical "turn" (*Kehre*) that Heidegger's thought took in the mid-Thirties. Throughout his career Heidegger, in a radical transformation of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, focused his philosophy on the "question of Being" (*die Seinsfrage*), which is really a question about meaning or significance and can be formulated as follows: Granted the obvious—that things already exist out there in the world—what accounts for the fact that those things can have *significance* (what Heidegger calls "Being") for human understanding and action?^[14]

Up through the early Thirties Heidegger's philosophy often conveyed the impression that the significance of things was created by human subjects projecting their own purposes on the world. But in the mid-Thirties, Heidegger began articulating a very different view that emphasized the ancient Greek sense of a natural emergence of meaning. In contrast to the view that meaning is imposed on the world by human subjects—a position that he now excoriated as "metaphysical humanism" and "subjectivism" and that he saw as the source of modern civilization's domination of nature through technology—Heidegger argued that the true significance of things comes from beyond human beings. In Heidegger's famous formulation, "Being just happens to happen" (*es ereignet, es gibt Sein*) without a rationally discernible explanation and almost as a mystical gift to those "authentic" human beings who are open to it. Heidegger referred to this "happening" of significance as the "mystery of the self-disclosure of Being," and he held out the hope that, if properly attended to, it could somehow (he does not say how) save humankind from the wasteland of technology and nihilism. With this "turn" in his thinking, Heidegger abandoned any hope that human effort, especially in the political order, could significantly change the world. By 1966 his rejection of the efficacy of human action seemed total. He told an interviewer, "Only a god can save us now," where "god" means not some personal divinity but a future appearance of the "mystery of Being."

The question is whether Heidegger's philosophical abandonment of "humanism" and subjectivism entailed an abandonment of Nazism as well. Heidegger's most severe critics insist that (as Wolin caricatures Farias's position) "Heidegger was born a Nazi and remained one until the end of his days." A more nuanced position holds that, disillusioned with "actually existing" National Socialism, Heidegger exchanged it in the mid-Thirties for a philosophically construed "idealized Nazism" exalting, among other things, what the American philosopher Tom Rockmore calls "metaphysical racism," the idea that the German people, or at least their poets and philosophers, were uniquely and exclusively destined to save the West from nihilism.^[15]

Wolin's quarrel is with how Derrida manipulates the "turn" to salvage Heidegger's philosophy from the charge of Nazism. Wolin further suggests, unkindly but not implausibly, that Derrida's strategy is motivated by a desire to immunize his own philosophy of deconstruction against infection by the Heidegger affair. One may well disagree with Wolin on both scores, but he makes his case seriously and constructively. It goes something like this:

Derrida attributes Heidegger's support for Hitler to a misguided "metaphysical humanism" and subjectivism that blinded Heidegger for a while to the true mystery of Being. In 1933 this metaphysical myopia misled Heidegger into viewing Nietzsche as a philosophical antidote—and Nazism as a sociopolitical one—to the rampant nihilism and technology that Heidegger saw as devastating the globe. But by the mid-Thirties, so the theory goes, Heidegger's eyes were opened, and he saw that he was wrong, or partly wrong, in both cases. He discovered Nietzsche's proposed "transvaluation of values" to be infected with the very nihilism that it was trying to cure, and to his dismay he watched National Socialism betray its "philosophical" promise as it pursued technological mastery. So, from 1936 to 1938 he underwent an intellectual conversion that purified his thinking of the last traces of subjectivist humanism and in the process freed it from the Nazism to which that erroneous philosophical doctrine had led him. Thus, by attributing Heidegger's political involvement to something like a metaphysical mistake and by confining that mistake to a delimited period of time, Derrida, according to Wolin, attempts to salvage both Heidegger's pre-1933 and post-1935 philosophy from the taint of Nazism.

Wolin's complaint is that such an interpretation, while raising interesting philosophical and textual issues, sidesteps a serious confrontation with a number of important questions surrounding Heidegger's political engagement. For example:

Was Heidegger's support for Nazism primarily a philosophical affair—indeed, a philosophical mistake—that could be easily corrected by a change in philosophical position? The opposite would seem to be the case, namely, that Heidegger's support for Hitler was intimately bound up with his own very conservative political views and his deep-seated antidemocratic and antimodern attitudes. Since those attitudes demonstrably persist in Heidegger's thinking up to his death, to what degree is Heidegger's *entire* philosophy, both early and late, inextricably linked with his politics in the broadest sense, that is, with what he called the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism?

And is it the case that "metaphysical humanism" is primarily responsible for Heidegger's fall into Nazism? Wolin argues to the contrary that

something quite different from such "humanism"—namely, Heidegger's dogged insistence on imposing his notions of Being on politics—is responsible for his blindness to Nazism's true purposes.

And then there is the question of why, after the war, Heidegger chose to maintain an almost hermetic silence about his support for Hitler and the Nazis and refused to condemn even their most flagrant atrocities. Shouldn't the philosopher who had written so powerfully about the existential themes of responsibility, resoluteness, and authenticity have had at least something to say about his personal responsibility for his actions during the Third Reich instead of glossing over the matter by blaming everything and everyone else? Ernst Jünger reports Heidegger saying that rather than apologize for his political errors, he would wait for Hitler to come back to life and beg pardon for misleading him.¹⁶¹

Derrida's position on all this is more complex than Wolin's brief criticism (correct as far as it goes) allows, and one would have hoped for an illuminating exchange between the two scholars on the issues Wolin has raised. But given Derrida's legal threats against the very existence of Wolin's book, it seems that such an exchange, far from being likely, is one more casualty of the "Heidegger Wars."

2.

In a 1988 television interview Hermann Heidegger, the philosopher's elder son and literary executor, expressed his hope that a biography of Heidegger would soon be written to "change and considerably flesh out the image of my father [during the Nazi period].... I know someone who is up to the task, but I don't want to mention any names at present."¹⁷¹

It now seems that person was Ernst Nolte, the prominent conservative German historian who in the late Eighties provoked the "historians' dispute" with his controversial interpretations of Nazism and the Final Solution. Nolte is notorious for his theses that Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union was arguably a *defensive* action against perceived threats from communism and world Jewry and that the Holocaust—or, as he puts it, "the so-called annihilation of the Jews"—was a reaction to and even an imitation of the excesses of Soviet class warfare.¹⁸¹

Nolte has been accused of employing a strategy of "comparative trivialization," whereby the Holocaust is "explained," and Nazi crimes are relativized and even "humanized," by being juxtaposed with Soviet atrocities.¹⁹¹ But Nolte says he is not trying to justify the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities but only to "understand" them, to compare them with similar mass crimes of this century, and thus to stop the "demonization of the Third Reich," Nolte wants to let "the past pass away," that is, to free Germans from their "pathological condition" of still living in the shadow of National Socialism and so to help Germany, with a clear conscience, "become a spiritually vital nation again."¹⁰¹

With the publication last September of Nolte's *Martin Heidegger: Politik und Geschichte im Leben und Denken* the strategy for defending Heidegger enters a radically new phase. As a historian of modern ideologies, Nolte thinks he is "better able to understand Heidegger's political engagement and his relation to 'empirical' history than [even Heidegger himself] could or wanted to in his public statements." (p. 8, see p. 283). Unlike Heidegger's official apologists,¹¹¹ Nolte does not soft-pedal Heidegger's enthusiasm for National Socialism, or blame it on metaphysics, or dismiss it as a temporary aberration. Nor does he have the problem (to adapt a phrase from Tim Redman's work on Ezra Pound) of reconciling the philosophy you like with the politics you loathe.¹²¹ Nolte thinks Heideggerians should stop running away from Heidegger's support for Hitler and should begin providing what the Master could not: a historical and political justification for that support. Nolte declares that backing Hitler in 1933 was the correct decision.

All those who at that time aspired to a "German socialism" should be considered rehabilitated, even if one thinks this solution failed (p. 150; compare pp. 114–115, 148–152, 291–297).

Therefore, according to Nolte, Heidegger can be accounted "justified" (*Gerechtfertigter*, p. 152) in his decision to support the Nazis.

Insofar as Heidegger resisted the attempt at the [Communist] solution, he, like countless others, was historically right.... In committing himself to the [National Socialist] solution perhaps he became a "fascist." But in no way did that make him historically wrong from the outset (p.296).

With friends like Nolte, Heidegger may not need enemies.

Without offering anything like extended arguments for his claims, Nolte disqualifies three groups of people from criticizing Heidegger's political involvement with National Socialism: first, Communists, because Nolte believes communism was "the chief cause" (*Hauptursache*) of the rise of Nazism;¹³¹ second, liberals, insofar as they have favored coexistence with communism; and, finally, pragmatic "pluralists," because they do not confront the structural crisis of liberal democracy but, rather, try to solve society's problems by mere "individual reforms" on a "case-by-case basis" and thus are stuck "at the level of the everyday with its makeshift practical wisdom" (p. 151–152). Nolte suggests that the only people qualified to judge Heidegger's support for the Nazis are those who share Nolte's "historical theory of the liberal system" (p. 152), his view that Nazism arose as a reaction to communism and, given the other unacceptable alternatives, was the right political system for Germany in 1933.

As Nolte sees it, Germans after the Great War were faced with a cataclysmic crisis in liberal democracy and were caught between two solutions, National Socialism and communism.¹⁴¹ Given those options, Nolte says, the vast majority of Germans, Heidegger among them, clearly did the right thing in choosing the Nazis in 1933 as "the far less radical party," which, moreover, seemed to be detaching itself from Hitler's rabid anti-Semitism (p. 115). While condemning the Second World War and the Holocaust, Nolte argues that it is not legitimate to interpret the events of 1939–1945 as the necessary consequence of supporting Hitler in 1933.¹⁵¹ Nolte believes that until the mass deportations started and the death camps began to operate, the Nazi program of merely "removing" the Jews from German life without systematically killing them was "much less encompassing" and morally less reprehensible than the Soviet program of abolishing the bourgeoisie as a social class. Only at the end, with the death camps, did the Nazi program prove to be "morally more objectionable":

Up until 1939, perhaps even until 1941, Hitler himself had in mind little more than the "removal" ["*Entfernung*"] of German Jews, to be carried out on various levels. But as soon as the war broke out—which no doubt Hitler wanted, but not in the

form it actually took—it became clear that National Socialism had not only this quasi "philosophy-of-history" concept of annihilation but also a biological concept of annihilation (p. 151).

On the question of the invasion of Russia, Nolte argues that "a group of people, whether a class or a *Volk*, that is threatened with annihilation by another group, defends itself and has a fundamental right to defend itself," and that this right accrues to Nazis as well as to Jews. He believes, moreover, that Hitler's fear of Bolshevism was "objectively grounded" and therefore concludes that it is arguably the case that the invasion of the Soviet Union "was objectively a preventive war."¹⁶

But Nolte goes even further and applies some of this reasoning to the Final Solution. He argues that while Hitler's fear of the Jews was to some degree paranoid, "the slide from 'Communists threaten us' to 'Jews threaten us' that occurred in the mind of Hitler and some of his entourage is not entirely irrational." Could it be, then, that even the Holocaust was, in Hitler's mind, "a preventive war"? Nolte does not exactly say that, although he comes perilously close. He suggests that Chaim Weizmann's 1939 declaration that Palestinian Jews would "stand by Great Britain and fight on the side of the democracies" could be interpreted by the Nazis as "a declaration of war against Germany or Hitler" and that, in any case, Weizmann's declaration shows that "Hitler had good reasons to be convinced of the determination of his enemies [the Jews as well as the Bolsheviks] to annihilate him."¹⁷

Whether or not Nolte thinks that Auschwitz was a form of defensive war, he has asserted that everything the Nazis did to the Jews—"with the sole exception of the technical procedure of gassing"—had already been done by the Bolsheviks to their enemies, at least according to White Russian literature. Hence he thinks the historian must ask the following question:

Could it be the case that the National Socialists and Hitler carried out an "Asiatic" deed [the Holocaust] only because they considered themselves and their kind to be potential or actual victims of a [Soviet] "Asiatic" deed? Didn't the "Gulag Archipelago" precede Auschwitz? Wasn't the Bolsheviks' "class murder" the logical and factual forerunner of the Nazis' "race murder"?¹⁸

3.

Nolte, who recently retired from the Free University of Berlin, has long been a friend of the Heidegger family, with personal ties reaching back to 1944, when he began studying philosophy at Freiburg University. Soon after the two had met, Heidegger, fearing arrest by the Allies, left his wife in Freiburg, jumped on a bicycle (he never learned to drive a car), and began pedaling east to hide out in his hometown of Messkirch. Nolte to the rescue. "I caught up with him on my own bicycle," Nolte recalls, "to bring him a knapsack full of clean laundry and some food that his wife had given me for him."¹⁹

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Nolte's book on Heidegger reads something like a company biography of Henry Ford. Virtually everything about Heidegger's Nazi period is excused, passed over, dismissed, or, as a last resort, "explained." Nolte makes very selective use of historical data in this book. For example, he blithely remarks that Heidegger supported National Socialism because he wanted "to complete and solidify the process of 'class reconciliation' that had already achieved some success in its initial stages" (p. 297). But he hardly mentions that during the initial stages (January through May 1933), the "successes" of "class reconciliation" included the end of democracy, the suspension of civil liberties, the arrest of scores of Communist deputies and hundreds of labor leaders, the exclusion of Jews from civil service jobs, and the burning of 20,000 books.

Instead, consistent with his belief that Nazism was the right regime for Germany in 1933, Nolte offers a phenomenology of "Heidegger the normal Nazi" (p. 142) putting in a day's work as Führer-rector of Freiburg University.

As rector, Heidegger was caught up in the everyday activities of the regime. He had to represent the university, give short speeches, show up at the airport to greet cabinet ministers, promulgate governmental laws, and make decisions about concrete matters. Since he was a Party member, entirely routine documents would come across his desk, perhaps containing assurances of someone's "Aryan descent" (p. 141).

Nolte admits some of these routine acts were not very savory, such as promulgating a law denying academic funding to "non-Aryan" and Marxist students, and refusing to intervene when Nazis closed a Jewish fraternity house and arrested six of its members. But he insists Heidegger was "only a middle-man" (p. 143) in these routine matters and lets him off with a slap on the wrist.

Moreover, after a busy day at the office a normal Nazi like Heidegger might still find time to dash off a letter or two blackballing some colleagues. Nolte can understand that. Did Heidegger in one of those letters make a contemptible remark about "the fired Jew Fraenkel"? No, says Nolte, that reference to Professor Eduard Fraenkel, the noted classicist dismissed from the university under Nazi racial laws, was merely a shorthand way of saying "[Professor] Fraenkel, who was fired from here because he was a Jew" (p. 144). Did Heidegger try to get two of his colleagues fired, the one for being a pacifist and the other for being "anything but a National Socialist" some years earlier? Nolte can understand that, too: Heidegger was merely "pointing out the inner contradiction" between their earlier and later behavior, and was "hardly wrong to do so." Did Heidegger, having denounced the young philosopher Max Müller as "unfavorably disposed" to the regime, refuse to retract the damning statement when Müller begged him to? "It is hard to see how Heidegger could have done otherwise," Nolte explains, "once he had submitted what was, after all, a true denunciation."

Then there is the earlier case (1929) of Heidegger's letter recommending that academic funding be given to a non-Jewish teacher rather than to a Jewish one, because Heidegger favored

providing our German intellectual life with real talents and educators rooted in our soil [rather than] surrendering that intellectual life once and for all to ever-increasing Judaization [*Verjudung*] in both a broad and narrow sense.²⁰

Nolte can also explain that: "Here the word 'Judaization' is set in opposition to 'rootedness in our soil' and thus is something like a metaphor

for 'internationalization'" (p. 145). But this attempt to salvage Heidegger (who in 1933 asserted there was "a dangerous international alliance of Jews") solves nothing, since in the conservative rhetoric of the time the terms "international" and "Jewish" were virtually interchangeable: to say *Internationalisierung* was to say *Verjudung*, which recalled the cognate German word *verjudet*, "Jewified" or "Jew-ridden."^[21]

Just as Nolte can recognize a "normal National Socialist" when he sees one, so too he can distinguish a "normal anti-Semite" from the more nefarious kind, and in fact he provides a criterion for doing so.^[22] A *real* anti-Semite—the only kind that seems to count—is, he says, someone who

opposes Jews and tries to get rid of them *as* Jews, with no exceptions allowed. [...Thus:] The only person who qualifies as an anti-Semite is the one for whom the aversion to Jews or the struggle against them stands at the center of his thought and activity (pp. 29–30).

Under this strict criterion, according to Nolte, Heidegger is absolved of the charge of anti-Semitism, for not only is there no evidence that he approved of anything like the Holocaust (see p. 151) but also, unlike the Führer, the philosopher never linked any of the major concepts of his thought with anti-Semitism.

In that regard he was the precise opposite of Adolf Hitler, and such he would have remained even if he occasionally may have said that he had no sympathy for Jews or that the Jews in America were working against him (pp. 290–291).

In Nolte's eyes, his strict criterion absolves even the controversial Catholic preacher, Abraham a Sancta Clara (1644–1709), of the charge of anti-Semitism. Victor Fariás had called attention in his book to Heidegger's lifelong admiration for this Augustinian monk, who was a native of Heidegger's hometown of Messkirch and who was, among other things, notorious for the virulent sermons he delivered in seventeenth-century Vienna (for example: "the perfidious Jews...the worst enemy of mankind...they all ought to be hanged, even burned").

But Nolte can understand that, too: it simply doesn't count as *real* anti-Semitism, at least not according to his criterion. His explanation is stunning:

Referring to "the perfidious Jews" who rejected Christ and delivered him to death has been a characteristic of Christianity throughout its entire existence up to the present; but Christianity has never gotten totally absorbed in this antagonism. Judaism was the mother religion of Christianity; to require that Christianity should not be "anti-Semitic" is the same as demanding that Christianity should not have come into existence. Of course as historical circumstances change, one can emphasize what the two have in common rather than what sets them apart. But in Abraham [a Sancta Clara's] time that was not the case. He was above all a Christian, and therefore, it goes without saying, he was also an "anti-Semite" (p. 30).^[23]

As regards Heidegger's comportment as a professor, Nolte writes, "Never did any of [his Jewish students] claim to have perceived 'anti-Semitic tendencies' in Heidegger" (p. 290). It may well be true that his students had no such perception; and there is no evidence that Heidegger's anti-Semitism was anything like that of his wife, who doubtless put pressure on him to join the Nazi party.^[24] Nonetheless, Nolte does not present all the evidence. As a historian he certainly knows of the letter (published three years ago) that Heidegger's Jewish mentor, Edmund Husserl, wrote to Professor Dietrich Mahnke on May 4, 1933, lamenting the breakdown in his once very warm relationship with Heidegger.

The lovely conclusion to this "bosom friendship" between philosophers was his publicly enacted entrance into the Nazi party on May 1: very theatrical, indeed! Before that he took the initiative and broke off relations with me—soon after his appointment [at Freiburg], in fact. And over the last few years there was his anti-Semitism, which he came to express with increasing vigor, even against the circle of his most enthusiastic students, as well as around the department. That was a hard thing to get over.^[25]

Was Husserl mistaken in the charge he makes here? Or did Heidegger's actions fit the pattern of the normal anti-Semitism of a normal Nazi?

4.

Nolte refuses to distinguish between Heidegger the political activist and Heidegger the philosopher insofar as he thinks that Heidegger was an "embodiment" (p. 283) of the social and political tensions of German society and that the crisis of liberal democracy early in this century was a major impetus and a persisting problem for Heidegger's philosophy. "Both as a thinker and a man Heidegger found himself in the midst of [that historical process], and as a thinker he was constantly related to it" (p. 295).

Contrary to what Hannah Arendt maintained about Heidegger's support for Hitler, Nolte thinks it "was not an episodic 'flight' from the realm of philosophy into everyday politics but was sustained by a 'philosophical' hope" and was "essential to his life and thought" (p. 277). What, then, was the "philosophical hope" that led Heidegger to get involved with National Socialism?

Nolte argues plausibly that Heidegger's religious upbringing, imbued as it was with "the traditional Catholic critique of secularism, liberation, and revolution," favorably disposed him to the conservative revolution of the Twenties and ultimately explains "the fundamental anti-Enlightenment traits of his thinking" (pp. 19, 288–289, 273).

His judgment on the course of [Western] history unquestionably had all the characteristics of the Catholic evaluation and description of that history for over two hundred years: as a disintegration and downfall, a destruction of [hierarchical] distance and rank, a forgetting of what is essential, and a process of uprooting and leveling (p. 295).

To this critique of modernity, which runs through his entire philosophy, Heidegger added his theory of the "historical dispensations of Being"

(*Seinsgeschichte*, see p. 199), the notion that Being was in essence "dispensed" to human beings over the course of Western history by a mysterious process lying beyond their control. In this regard Nolte makes the astonishing claim that in the early Thirties Heidegger believed Adolf Hitler was a new and definitive "dispensation of Being" for Western civilization. Referring to Heidegger's declaration, "The Führer himself and alone *is* German reality and law today and for the future," Nolte says:

It simply cannot be denied that here Heidegger linked the specific individual Adolf Hitler with the highest idea of his philosophy; the *dispensation* of a new disclosure of truth and hence a fundamental transformation in Being. Hitler *is* reality both today and especially for the future; therefore, Hitler certainly was what Heidegger a few years later would call the "event" ["*Ereignis*"], an arrival of the truth of Being.^[26]

What Heidegger wanted from Hitler was what the Führer himself promised: to reverse, as Nolte summarizes Hitler's world view, "the most profound trajectory of history itself: progress, the process of civilization."^[27] But he wanted more than just resistance to modernity and its alleged nihilism. For Heidegger the "inner truth and greatness" and "historic singularity" of National Socialism—hardly glimpsed by the Party hacks but clearly envisioned by the philosopher—lay in the unique opportunity Hitler supposedly had to reshape Nazi Germany on the model of the ancient Greek polis and to guide Western civilization toward a "new appropriation of Being." For Heidegger this task was the "hidden mandate" of the German people, their "mission in Western history."^[28]

The idea of using classical Greece as a model for Nazi Germany—and Nazi Germany as a model for Western civilization—seems, in the one case, naive and, in the other, horrifying; but for Heidegger it corresponded to what he called "*das Revolutionäre*," the *real* conservative revolution. Heidegger's philosophical conception of "revolution" grew out of his ideas about "historicity," specifically, that the authentic way for a nation to realize its historical potential is to fashion its future from out of its past (as he put it, "to recuperate, in a more original form, the essential power...concealed within the old").^[29] This philosophical conception of revolution (which harkens back to Aristotle) is what Heidegger had in mind when he affirmed that "his partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy" and that "his concept of 'historicity' was the basis of his political 'engagement.'" ^[30]

It is clear, then, that Heidegger had both socio-political *and* philosophical motives for supporting the National Socialists: his reactionary political world view let him find much that was congenial in the Nazi program, including elements of its anti-Semitism; and his theory of Being led him to see Hitler as a modern philosopher-king who might lead Europe out of nihilism and on to a "new beginning" of history.^[31] As it turned out, the philosopher and the Nazis were very much in harmony on the first score, but worlds apart on the second as the party began fostering the very things he thought contributed to nihilism, namely, the proliferation of technology and the cult of production—what Ernst Jünger called "total mobilization." So Heidegger and the party began to come unglued.

Nolte argues that in the mid-to-late Thirties Heidegger began taking some distance from official National Socialism even though the separation was frequently ambiguous and never total. (For example, right up to the end of the war Heidegger had difficulty distinguishing his own "philosophical" version of nationalism from that of official National Socialism.^[32]) In 1988 Heidegger's son Hermann, who was an enthusiastic member of the Hitler Youth in the 1930s and who eventually fought and was taken prisoner on the Eastern Front, made the quite credible assertion that

in the mid-Thirties, in 1935, 1936, 1937, I found myself in conflict with my parents, because they had already interiorly detached themselves from the movement and because they saw it was all going to end badly. I myself did not awaken to that fact until during the war, when I was a young man.^[33]

However, Heidegger's interior "detachment" from the party in the mid-Thirties had little to do with disagreements over concrete social or political policies at home or abroad, and in no way did it shake his commitment to Hitler. In 1936 Heidegger told his colleague Karl Löwith that "he was as convinced now as before that National Socialism was the right course for Germany" and "he left no doubt about his faith in Hitler."^[34]

Rather, Heidegger's disillusionment had to do with the party's failure to carry out Heidegger's own philosophical program of renewing the promise of the ancient Greek polis, overcoming European nihilism, and returning Germany to a less hectic and more simple life. Thus his so-called "break" with official Nazism in the mid-Thirties consisted in his decision to be *more* true to the "inner truth and greatness" of the movement than the party ever could be (Nolte, pp. 164–165).

As Heidegger pulled back from official National Socialism, he took his stand on what a party functionary termed his "private National Socialism": his idiosyncratic blend of conservative philosophy and reactionary politics, which he preserved intact for the rest of his life. Armed with his anti-democratic world view, Nolte says, "Heidegger, all alone as it seems, now set himself against the whole of world civilization and its imposing power"—and yes, along with everything else, against Nazism, too.^[35] But his "resistance" to Nazism, if it can be called that, consisted at best in suggesting to his students—from the safety of the classroom podium, and always in cryptic terms—that they begin thinking about how the *real* conservative revolution might overcome nihilism.

Whatever their *philosophical* value might be, there is considerable disagreement about the *political* meaning of Heidegger's university lectures from 1934 to 1945, including his cycle of courses on Nietzsche. Did these lectures, heavily encoded as they were in abstruse philosophical language, constitute the most profound and devastating critique of Nazism ever voiced during the Third Reich, as his loyal disciples claim? Or were they a series of relatively harmless philosophical analyses of and laments for the alleged decline of Western civilization, which Heidegger attributed to the fact that virtually *everyone* in Europe for more than two millennia had forgotten to think about the "mystery of Being"?

On a close reading those courses in no way look like a sharply focused attack on National Socialism. They read, rather, like a sustained philosophical broadside against the entire cultural and political history of the West for falling into nihilism. In Heidegger's account, everything in general—and therefore nothing in particular—seems to be at fault. "Nowadays," he said in 1945, "everything is part of this [nihilism], whether it is called Communism or fascism or world democracy."^[36] It was the night in which all cows are black.

Heidegger's courses may well have helped some students see through National Socialism. Nonetheless, it is worth noting three things: (1) that the Nazis, who had spies in almost every professor's classroom, never felt threatened enough by what he said to remove him from his job; (2) that after the war a denazification committee of his peers, many of them favorably disposed to Heidegger, remained unconvinced by his claims of "intellectual resistance" and did remove him from his job; and (3) that Heidegger himself finally admitted that his lectures were anything but tough attacks on Nazism. Rather, he decided in the Thirties that intellectual resistance to the Nazi world view "did not require any special attacks on my part; it was enough to articulate my basic philosophical position" as distinct from Alfred Rosenberg's. Indeed, he described his teaching as not a direct confrontation with Nazism but "more a monologue of essential thinking with itself," one that failed to "shape itself into a dynamic structure of specific conduct."^[37]

However critical one may be of his revisionist interpretations of the Third Reich, Ernst Nolte has performed a great service for Heidegger scholarship by showing how closely Heidegger's philosophy was wed to his politics, and how deep and long-lasting was his commitment to "the inner truth and greatness" of the Nazi movement. Of course, Nolte's position creates considerable problems for those scholars who have thought Heidegger's philosophy could easily be detached from his reactionary social and political convictions. Many Heideggerians, to be sure, are more than happy to share the Master's deeply conservative view of the world. Those who are not face the task of retrieving a different message, or perhaps only some questions, from the texts of this thinker who, as Professor Otto Pöggeler has suggested, "fell into the proximity of National Socialism—not accidentally but through a definite orientation of his thought—and never really got out."^[38]

Notes

^[1] See Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, translated by Paul Burrell and Gabriel R. Ricci (Temple University Press, 1989); Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger*, translated by Alan Blunden (Basic Books, 1993); and my "Heidegger and the Nazis," *The New York Review*, June 16, 1988.

^[2] On Heidegger's effort to have Yale University Press omit his sentence about "the inner truth and greatness" of Nazism from his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (Yale University Press, 1982), p. 443. For the relation of Nazi ideology and antimodernism: Raymond H. Dominick III, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871–1971* (Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 81–115.

^[3] See Michael Zimmerman's superb *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* (Indiana University Press, 1990).

^[4] For one of his early formulations of Being as significance see Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe* Vol. 56/57 (Klostermann, 1987), pp. 73–76, and the commentary in Theodore Kisiel's *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (University of California Press, 1993), ch. 1.

^[5] Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (University of California Press, 1992), p.296.

^[6] *Der Spiegel*, August 18, 1986, p.167. See Thomas Harrison's illuminating treatment of resoluteness in his *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 151–153.

^[7] "Le fils de Heidegger parle," the translation of Hermann Heidegger's interview with Paul Kobish on FR3 television, is published in *Globe*, Vol. 26 (March 1988), p.68.

^[8] Nolte, "Between Myth and Revisionism?" in H. W. Koch, editor, *Aspects of the Third Reich* (St. Martin's, 1985), pp. 17–38 ("so-called annihilation," p. 36); and Nolte, *Das Vergehen der Vergangenheit* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1987), pp. 171–179. Nolte elaborates his position in *Three Faces of Fascism*, translated by Leila Vennewitz (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), *Deutschland und der Kalte Krieg* (Munich: Piper, 1974), and *Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945* (Frankfurt-Berlin: Propyläen/Ullstein, 1987).

^[9] Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews, and Other Germans* (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. xi. Nolte claims "every significant modern-day state that set itself an extraordinary goal has had its own Hitler-era with its atrocities and victims," and as examples he lists Stalinism, Maoism, Nasserism, Sukarnism, and Gaullism. However, he says this "does not constitute a 'justification' of National Socialism." *Deutschland und der Kalte Krieg*, pp. 601 and 89. See further his "Pluralität der Hitlerzeit?" in his *Was ist bürgerlich?* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979), pp. 88–113.

^[10] "Between Myth and Revisionism?" p. 37, and his *Die Krise des liberalen Systems und die faschistischen Bewegungen* (Munich: Piper, 1968), p. 442.

^[11] For example: Parvis Emad, "Introduction" in Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1929–1976*, translated by P. Emad and K. Maly (University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. xi–xxxi. For a refreshing contrast to such "biblicism of Heidegger-orthodoxy" (Reinhard Mehring, *Heideggers Überlieferungs-geschick* [Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1992], p. 10), see John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Indiana University Press, 1993), ch.5.

^[12] Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.3.

^[13] Nolte disqualifies Herbert Marcuse in particular because he allegedly "sympathized with the right of Bolshevism and bolshevized German Communism to seize complete power in Europe along the Russian model" (p. 264). Nolte does not say where Marcuse expressed this sympathy.

^[14] Nolte allows in hindsight that other solutions to the Weimar Republic's problems were both possible and desirable: for example, a conservative coalition led by Defense Minister Kurt von Schleicher (who was murdered by the SS in 1934). "But can we demand," he asks, "that people back then have the clarity and certainty we have today?" (p. 114).

- ^[15] *Martin Heidegger*, p. 267. Nolte vigorously opposes ascribing collective guilt for those actions to the Germans, and he compares such a procedure to Hitler's blaming the Jews collectively for the ills of modern society. See *Das Vergehen der Vergangenheit*, pp. 105, 123, 139, 141, 143, 173; also his "Philosophie und Nationalsozialismus" in Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert and Otto Pöggeler, editors, *Heidegger und die praktische Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 354.
- ^[16] See *Vergehen der Vergangenheit*: fundamental right to self-defense, p. 139; objectively grounded fear, p. 100; preventive war, p. 109.
- ^[17] See *Vergehen der Vergangenheit*: slide to "Jews threaten us," p. 104–105; "declaration of war," p. 93. Weizmann's statement (*London Times*, September 5, 1939) is reproduced in *Aspects of the Third Reich*, p. 378. For "Hitler had good reasons" see "Between Myth and Revisionism?" p. 27.
- ^[18] *Vergehen der Vergangenheit*, p. 177; originally in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Vol. 128 (June 6, 1986), p. 25.
- ^[19] Antonio Gnoli, "Il Sessantotto? Lo inventò Heidegger," interview with Ernst Nolte, *La Repubblica* (Rome), September 11, 1992, p. 31. Nolte took his Ph.D. in 1962 under Heidegger's close associate Eugen Fink. For a sketch of his early intellectual relation to Heidegger see Nolte's *Die Krise des liberalen Systems und die faschistischen Bewegungen*, pp. 447–448.
- ^[20] Heidegger's 1929 letter is reproduced in Ulrich Sieg, "Die Verjudung des deutschen Geistes," *Die Zeit*, Vol. 52 (December 22, 1989), p. 50.
- ^[21] See Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung*, translated by H. Arnold (Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 54 and 64. On "verjudet," compare Hitler's 1923 statement that "*das jüdische Volk...wird...unser Volk verjudet haben*" in Eberhard Jäckel and Alex Kuhn, editors, *Hitler: Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen, 1905–1924* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, 1980), pp. 778–779. On "a dangerous international alliance of Jews," Karl Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie* (Munich: Piper, 1977), p. 101.
- ^[22] See Lucy S. Davidowicz's remarks on "conventional anti-Semitism" in *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), pp. 158–159.
- ^[23] In a telephone conversation on November 20, 1992, Nolte told me the statement expressed what he meant and he found nothing in it requiring change or nuance other than to explain that Abraham's language fit a certain literary and rhetorical form ("Grobianism") of the Baroque period.
- ^[24] See "Le fils de Heidegger parle," p. 68. On Mrs. Elfride Heidegger's support for the Nazis since at least 1925 and her alleged anti-Semitism, see Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 61.
- ^[25] In Bernd Martin, editor, *Martin Heidegger und das "Dritte Reich": Ein Kompendium* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), p. 149.
- ^[26] *Martin Heidegger*, p. 131, where curiously, in quoting Heidegger's statement of November 3, 1933 ("*Der Führer...ist...deutsche Wirklichkeit*"), and in paraphrasing it in the paragraph above, Nolte twice omits the adjective "*deutsche*" ("German"), thereby giving the statement a much broader scope than Heidegger may have intended.
- ^[27] Nolte, *Was ist bürgerlich?*, p. 98. See his *Martin Heidegger*, pp. 265–266. (*Fortschritt, Emanzipation*).
- ^[28] "Historic singularity," *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 53, p. 106. "Appropriation," "mandate," and "mission" in Martin Heidegger and Elisabeth Blochmann, *Briefwechsel 1918–1969* (Marbach: Deutsche Literaturarchiv, 1989), p. 60. "Greek polis" in Nolte, *Martin Heidegger*, pp. 150–151, 194–195, 297. For Heidegger's claim that National Socialism constituted "the great turning point of [German] existence" see *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 39, p. 136.
- ^[29] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, translated by J. Anderson and E. H. Freund (Harper and Row, 1966), p. 63 (*das Revolutionäre*), and *On the Way to Language*, translated by P. Hertz (Harper and Row, 1971), p. 36 (*zurückzugewinnen, Wiederholen*), and Nolte, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 160 (*Wiederholung der Vergangenheit*).
- ^[30] Heidegger's statement of April 3, 1936, is reported by Karl Löwith and translated in Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, p. 142.
- ^[31] Heidegger's positive assessment in 1936 of Hitler's opposition to nihilism is found in his *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 42, pp. 40–41, but is omitted from his *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 23, line 20.
- ^[32] See Nolte, *Martin Heidegger*, pp. 186, 192–195, 197, 200, 282; see p. 158 (*ein blosser Nationalist*) and pp. 99, 127, and 139–140 (*Bodenständigkeit*, etc.).
- ^[33] "Le fils de Heidegger parle," p. 68.
- ^[34] In Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, p. 142; further, Nolte, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 171, for Heidegger's continuing confidence in Hitler in August 1934, that is, even after the massacre of Ernst Röhm and his SA followers on June 30, 1934.
- ^[35] Nolte, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 240; see pp. 185 (*und mithin den N.S.*) and 187 (*nicht...Nationalsozialismus allein*). Some of Heidegger's disparaging remarks on democracy, dating from 1952, 1966, and 1974, are recorded in Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, translated by Lisa Harries (Paragon, 1990), p. 54, and Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues*, pp.

76 and 222. See *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 39, p. 99 (*Liberalismus*) and Nolte, p. 216 (*Pluralismus*).

[36] In Neske and Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, p. 18; see Nolte, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 204.

[37] Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, p. 64, and Neske and Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, p. 29 (my translation).

[38] Otto Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger's Path of Thinking*, translated by D. Magurshak and S. Barber (Humanities Press, 1987), p. 272. Translation slightly revised.

Letters

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February 11, 1993: John D. Moore, '[L'affaire Derrida](#)'

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