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Heidegger and Marx

Invitations to a 'Marxist' re-reading of Heidegger are repeated today with ever increasing frequency. Since the suit is pressed with such urgency, and we are recommended so reasonably to avoid adopting an *a priori* stance, we should at least entertain the suggestion. We therefore propose to devote a few hours of unprejudiced reflection to the question. It is fair, however, and only honest to our reader, to recall at the outset a fact of the matter which our petitioners for a Marxisant Heidegger prefer to pass over in silence: namely, Heidegger's adherence to Nazism at the now distant date of 1933. Though one can dispute both whether and to what extent this support has any connection with the substance of Heidegger's thought, one cannot ignore it. Nor can one dismiss it out of hand as an insignificant episode. For that indeed would demonstrate a blind apriorism, in favour of a conception of 'high bourgeois culture' extended beyond all belief. On the subject of Heidegger's relations with Nazism, two documents of particular interest, not least because they are to some extent mutually illuminating, have recently been made public (they have been published in Italy in *L'Espresso*). One

is the text of an interview given by Heidegger in 1966 to the weekly, *Der Spiegel*, on condition that it would be published only after his death. The other is a few pages of Karl Jaspers's *Autobiography* which the editor of that work had again undertaken not to make public until Heidegger died.

Relations with Nazism

Jaspers and Heidegger, the former at the University of Heidelberg, the latter at the University of Freiburg, figured as twin centres for the diffusion of German existentialism into European culture between the wars. In 1933, Heidegger's sudden alignment with Nazism created a breach between the two that was never to be healed. When Jaspers—who politically was a moderate—comes to recall this event, it is with some effort at self-criticism. He recognizes, for example, that he for too long underestimated the dangers of Nazism. He also acknowledges, and it is a cause of self-reproach, that he did nothing to dissuade his friend from the adoption of such an aberrant position; but ultimately one is left with the impression that relations between the two were of too superficial a nature to have rendered any dialogue productive. In March of 1933, after the triumph of Nazism, Heidegger was the guest of Jaspers at Heidelberg. Once again, the two fell to their habitual philosophical discussions and together listened to records of Gregorian music. Only when he was on the point of saying goodbye did the departing guest decide to speak of 'the rapid development of the Nazi reality', declaring that 'one has to become involved'. 'I was amazed', comments Jaspers, 'and did not pursue the question'. But the ingenuous Professor Jaspers must have been left even more astonished when, a few months later, his friend returned clad in his new official robes as Rector of Freiburg University ('addressed as Comrade Heidegger'), to repeat in front of the students and teachers of Heidelberg his investiture speech on '*The Self-Affirmation of the German University*'. As Jaspers testifies: 'In form it was the typical academic speech; but in its content it represented neither more nor less than a Nazi programme for university reform.'

In his 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, Heidegger himself denies that his Rectoral speech of 1933 constituted a Nazi programme; it should really have been understood, on the contrary, as a statement of opposition to the Nazi claim to 'politicize science'. He does indeed acknowledge that, in his address he presented his own proposals for reform of the university as an element of 'our great and magnificent awakening' (Hitler had been nominated Chancellor of the Reich four months previously); but his words had been uttered in full conviction of their truth, and he thus had no cause for self-criticism. In substance, Heidegger's idea appears to have been that of an autonomous 'scientific service', that would complete the National Socialist programme of 'labour service' and 'military service', which in Hitler's demented conception was supposed to provide the basis for regeneration of the German nation. Only those well-dosed with fanaticism are drawn towards projects of this kind, and Heidegger can hardly have been immune in that period, if Jaspers was sufficiently struck to fear he might compromise himself if he told Heidegger his true opinion of the Nazi programme. Moreover, without some fanaticism Heidegger could scarcely have addressed himself to the students of Germany in

1933 in the following terms: 'You should not allow axioms and ideas to regulate your lives. The Führer, and he alone, is the present and future reality and law of Germany.' To the *Der Spiegel* interviewer, who reminds him of these words in 1966, Heidegger replies with evident embarrassment that he had realized on accepting the Rectorship that it would be impossible for him to proceed without compromise. But in thus suggesting that what is only explicable in terms of total intellectual disintegration was in fact a calculated compromise, the philosopher perhaps does himself an injustice.

Jaspers is correct to speak of 'a Heidegger who like others had succumbed to the Nazi drug'; but he is too hard on himself when he puts some of the blame on his own lack of courage in not having told his friend that 'he was on a mistaken path'. No one has a duty to speak when it is certain that the words will fall on deaf ears, and there is no cause to think that Heidegger would have been disposed to pay the slightest attention to the political arguments of a Jaspers—who, after all, was no more than another of those philosophy teachers for whom he had such deep disdain. In this connection, it will be instructive to record an edifying little interchange between our two philosophers of German existentialism, which is related by Jaspers: '"How can a man so devoid of culture as Hitler hold sway over Germany?", I asked. To which he replied: "To hell with culture—just look what magnificent hands he has!".' Hardly a dialogue worthy of intellectual giants! The 'provincial' Gramsci would have defined the little colloquy as 'Lorian'[1] and seen in it a confirmation of his observation that 'there is a more or less complete and perfect Lorianism for every epoch and for every nation'. He added: 'It is only now (1935), with the displays of unheard of brutality and shamelessness given in the name of "German culture" under Hitler's rule, that a few intellectuals are beginning to realize the fragility of modern civilization.' Today there are once again not a few intellectuals who are inclined to forget this.

Philosophy and Reality

However, it would be foolish to suppose that in making these points we have closed the discussion on Heidegger. For if we record the *fact* of Heidegger's support of Nazism, and refuse to consider it as a fortuitous or irrelevant incident of his biography, this means only that we take full account of the 'elasticity' displayed by a thinker from whom our Marxisant Heideggerians would now extract fresh mileage. It is, moreover, true that as early as 1934 Heidegger discharged himself of his Rectoral duties at the head of a Nazified university and returned to the closeted world of philosophical contemplation. From then on he abstained from any word or deed that would smack either of apology for the régime or (God forbid!) of criticism and condemnation. It is also the case 'that today Heideggerianism lends no support to any cultural or political position of a Nazi or fascistic complection'.

[1] The reference is to Achille Loria (1847–1943), an academic economist, attacked by Engels in the Preface to *Capital* II for his vulgarization and plagiarism of Marx. For Gramsci, he exemplified 'certain degenerate and bizarre aspects of the mentality of a group of Italian intellectuals and, therefore, of the national culture' (*Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*, p. 169), to which he gave the name of 'Lorianism'.

As a second condition of any re-reading of Heidegger, we must renounce facile attempts to discredit the thinker for his deliberate and programmatic obscurity of language, or to bring him into ridicule for those rarified banalities which alleviate the laborious decipherment of his pages (as, for example, when one reads of the 'thing' which 'things' or the 'world' which 'worlds'). Karl Löwith answering the question as to 'why one permits, if it is said by him, that which one would surely never indulge in any other thinker', has already offered us a convincing explanation: Heidegger's influence is rooted in the links that his thought establishes with contemporary historical reality. It is for this reason that it is worth engaging with so irksome a philosopher—who himself acknowledges that his thought has the appearance of 'something disordered and arbitrary'.

This admission is contained in a letter of 1950 addressed to a young student who, having attended a lecture by the philosopher on 'The Thing', questioned him explicitly about the concept of Being, which, as we know, is the fundamental Heideggerian category. Heidegger's reply (which was subsequently published as a 'Marginal Note' to the lecture on 'The Thing' in his *Lectures and Essays*) is a perfect model of ambiguity. On the one hand, there is a parade of modest declarations: the route that he signals 'does not profess to be a high road to salvation, nor does it lead to any new wisdom'; it is at most only a 'country path' which has already renounced 'any pretensions to produce an authentic work of culture or to represent an event in the history of the spirit'. On the other hand, there is the customary oracular tone, to which any reader of Heidegger must become habituated: 'To think "Being" is to respond to the appeal of its essence. The response arises with the appeal and consigns itself unto it. To respond to the appeal is to surrender before it, thereby entering into its language.' Any outside intervention in this dialogue, which is conducted in a predominantly cryptic language between the mysterious Being (the *Deus absconditus*) who summons, and its custodian who responds, would clearly be out of place. So much so in fact that, as Heidegger warns, it can come to pass that the custodian misinterprets the summons however finely attuned his ear has become in the course of persistent attention to its nuances. This will also allow us to explain the error to which the philosopher fell prey when he believed a 'call of Being' was to be heard in the language of the Nazi Führer.

It was probably not his only blunder. Following the defeat of Nazism, the development of late-capitalist society offered new terrain for Heidegger's meditations. His philosophy came to impinge increasingly upon contemporary reality. Let us hear, then, what this 'custodian of Being' has to tell us about the drama of the modern world. 'Man is mistaken', we are told at the beginning of the lecture on 'The Thing' from which we have already quoted, 'in his obsession with the thought of what might happen as a result of the explosion of the atomic bomb.' In reality, this anxiety is confused and inappropriate, since 'the dreadful event has already occurred'. Man, that is to say, 'does not see that the atomic bomb and its detonation are only the final by-products and ultimate effects of an event that has long since taken place'.

How and when did this terrible 'event' take place? Who is responsible for it? The reply which recurs in all of the later writings of this implacable critic of humanism, but more explicitly than elsewhere in the twenty-eight aphorisms that constitute *Overcoming Metaphysics*,[2] is at first sight surprising: the sole responsibility lies with metaphysics, which has cast Being into oblivion and shattered reality on account of its 'continuing difference of Being and beings'. In the rarified atmosphere of these philosophical categories, the most disconcerting processes are at work: the 'desolation of the earth' and the 'collapse of the world'. Even when we recall that what Heidegger means by 'metaphysics' is the logical structure of development of the modern world, all this may still seem rather vague; but one begins to understand what he has in mind when one reads that 'collapse and desolation find their adequate occurrence in the fact that metaphysical man, the *animal rationale*, gets fixed as the *labouring animal*'. Once given this lead, it becomes no great problem to disentangle the thread of the argument.

One might well call to mind Rousseau's provocative words in criticism of civil society: 'the contemplative man is a degenerate animal'. For Heidegger (who discovered in *contemplation* the loftiest of human activities) it is not 'contemplative man' but 'man the labourer' who is the 'degenerate animal'. Human labour, which is potentialized by science and technology, insofar as it transforms nature through appropriation of her sources of energy, is the real villain in the history of Being, of which metaphysics is only the destiny. Everything which exists on the earth ('being') lives in harmony with its natural possibilities: only man strives for the impossible, is a being who, in the oblivion of Being, cannot recognize the limits of his own possibility. 'The birch tree', says Heidegger, 'never oversteps its possibility. The colony of bees dwells in its possibility. It is first the will which arranges itself everywhere in technology that devours the earth in the exhaustion and consumption and change of what is artificial. Technology drives the earth beyond the developed sphere of its possibility into such things which are no longer a possibility and are thus the impossible.' An absurd and lunatic enterprise, assures us our sage, who has lived upon this earth 'in order to shepherd the mystery of Being and watch over the inviolability of the possible'.

In the course of this undertaking, in which Being consummates its destiny, the world becomes ever more monstrously unnatural; it is already, says Heidegger, transformed into an 'unworld', a shell left empty by the abandonment of 'Being', the blue-print of an abstract will which in truth is devoid of all power, because it is only a 'will to will' that knows neither subject nor object. Everything becomes a matter of 'technology', and this technology is for Heidegger nothing short of a 'completed metaphysics'. What is meant, in fact, by the term 'technology' is not only 'the separate areas of the production and equipment of machines' (to which he accords, however, a privileged and preeminent position), but 'all the areas of beings which equip the whole of beings:

[2] An English translation of this work is included in a collection of Heidegger's writings on metaphysics entitled *The End of Philosophy* (New York 1973). Quotations are taken from this translation.

objectified nature, the business of culture, manufactured politics and the gloss of ideals overlying everything'. Man features in this picture as merely the '*most important raw material*'; thus it is, Heidegger adds, that 'one can reckon with the fact that some day factories will be built for the artificial breeding of human material'. Why not? For 'the way in which artificial insemination is handled corresponds with stark consistency to the way in which literature is handled in the sector of "culture".'

The Impossibility of Change

Even if, for brevity's sake, we pass over other gloomy shadows lurking in these pages of Heidegger, it is clear enough that we are here in the presence of one more apocalyptic version of the romantic critique of capitalism. An analysis of actual existing tendencies in the contemporary world is manipulated until no way out is left. If any comparison with Marx is to be made, this first and fundamental difference must not be obscured. But we should also question to what extent and in what terms it is possible to entertain the idea of such a comparison.

Alfred Schmidt, with his customary zeal for philological precision, has taken the trouble to search throughout Heidegger's writings for all direct references to Marx. He did not discover many, and of those which he has been able to trace, the most pertinent, at least in their general bearing, are those which refer only to the Young Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts*; to the Marx, that is, for whom the yardstick is still the Hegelian category of alienation. It follows that Marx is only accorded a modest place; he is no more than a link in the chain that connects Hegel to Nietzsche. Hence the limited attention that Heidegger reserves for Marx is in fact appropriate, given that his intention was to grapple with the thought of Nietzsche, whom he found more congenial. But if this is the Marx who is *quoted* and respected, there is another Marx of whom Heidegger was not ignorant, and of whose presence he is aware even when he does not refer to him. This is Marx the scientist and revolutionary, who in his very analysis of the real world seeks to discover the way out from alienation. And with respect to this Marx, Heidegger's position is one of direct opposition.

The last fragment of *Overcoming Metaphysics* assures us that 'no mere action will change the world'. Every change is excluded, because 'the earth remains preserved in the inconspicuous law of the possible which it is'. And it is in order to defend to the ultimate this entrenched immutability of Being, in order to denounce the 'meaninglessness of human action which has been posited absolutely'—to bar the way, that is, to any revival of the philosophy of praxis—that Heidegger finally embarks on a critique even of his beloved Nietzsche. Nietzsche, however reactionary he may have been, did not give up the idea of a transformation of the world, and for this reason Heidegger holds that even his effort to transcend metaphysics remains 'thoroughly caught in metaphysics' and constitutes, indeed, its 'final entanglement'.

Some of the reasons which Heidegger offers for his critique of Nietzsche are particularly significant. 'Finally', he writes, 'Nietzsche's passion for creators betrays the fact that he thinks of the genius and the geniuslike

only in a modern way, and at the same time technologically from the viewpoint of accomplishment.' In this reduction of even creative genius to a simple element subordinated to that same technical apparatus that draws its nourishment from the material productivity of human labour, Heidegger intends to seal hermetically the circuit of the 'way of erring of Being'—that is, of a world without sense that revolves in a void. It might seem as if leaders had 'arranged everything in accordance with their own will'. But this is only an appearance, because in reality 'they are not the acting ones'. They too are cogs in the machinery that assures the functioning of the 'void' which is created by the abandonment of Being and by that planning of being which serves as surrogate for it. 'Herein the necessity of "leadership", that is, the planning calculation of the guarantee of the whole of beings, is required. For this purpose such men must be organized and equipped who serve leadership. The "leaders" are the decisive suppliers who oversee all the sectors of the consumption of beings . . . and thus master erring in its calculability.'

The key theme throughout this discourse is the transformation of Nietzsche's 'will to power' into an impersonal 'will to will'. In face of a mechanism of such ingenuity, the necessity of class struggle and political struggle is merely apparent and illusory. 'The struggle between those who are in power and those who want to come to power: on every side there is the struggle for power. Everywhere power itself is what is determinative.' Thus 'this struggle is in the service of power and is *willed by it*'. It is, therefore, not men who desire anything; they are all puppets of a 'will to will' which sets them in motion. No matter who wins, nothing really changes. Marxism can go back to its garret.

The Aesthetic Refuge

Does Heidegger then offer no possibility of salvation? For the vast majority of men, the answer is certainly no. But for the few elect who are attuned to 'the call of Being', there always remains a hope that they will succeed in living worthily, that is 'poetically' upon this earth. This is the message that Heidegger drew from a poem by Hölderlin. In any case, one must avoid any recourse to science, which is separated from thought by an abyss. 'There is no bridge which leads from science to thought', warns Heidegger, 'one can only leap from one to the other'. Heidegger admits (as did Benedetto Croce) that science does indeed have its uses; but it stands on the far side of the abyss, as an integral component of the techniques employed in the control of a world administered in the absence of Being. When he turns his back upon science, Heidegger seeks a refuge in art and in an identification of authentic life with the life of play. If his point of departure is theological (the separation between being and Being is a transparent transcription of the separation between man and God), his point of arrival is aesthetic. The resulting contrivances are often works of considerable taste and erudition, but at times they seem merely grotesque.

In this connection, let us quote once more from the lecture on 'The Thing', which begins with an analysis (in actual fact a series of digressions) on the essence of the jug, a common thing, only to finish with the magic Square, the *Geviert*, which will disclose the secret of Being as a

simple 'play of mirrors' between four elements each of which reflects the other three. All this is couched in a mysterious and solemn tone; but in the description of the Four (the *earth*, the *sky*, the *divinities* and the *mortals*) we find nothing more than a literary commonplace, evocative of traditional eastern mysticism. Of the *sky* it is said that it is 'the course of the sun, the phases of the moon, the splendour of the stars, the seasons of the year, the light of day and its decline, the obscurity and the clearness of night, the auspicious and the inauspicious time, the movement of the clouds and the bottomless blue of the aether'; of the *divinities* it is said that they are 'the messengers of the divinity, who signal to us'; and of the *mortals* that they are men, because 'only man dies' while 'the animal perishes' (death as the 'coffer of nullity' and the 'cure of Being').

This Heidegger can have no interest for us. What is disquieting, on the other hand, is to discover in his romantic critique of capitalism the presence of tendencies which take shape and are diffused even independently of his influence: the tendency to reduce culture to technology, which forms part of an organic perspective which is totalizing and totalitarian even when presented in pluralistic guise; the autonomization of forms of control, independently of the actual subjects struggling for power, which makes it possible for real struggles to be reduced to mere appearance, so that nothing actually changes; and finally, there is the introduction of the playful element into practical politics, whether the game in question is that of revolution or reform. It is with this practical Heideggerianism that Marxism must above all settle accounts, lest it be subject to its contamination.

Translated by Kate Soper