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HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS

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Heidegger argued in Being and Time and An Introduction to Metaphysics that "people" could achieve authenticity by "resolving upon" their primordial origins. Being was a polemos (the ancient Greek work for war), a field of strife and struggle, in which peoples were challenged to make a stand, opening themselves to the risk of death so as to be charged anew with life's energy and vitality. Surrounded by the "pincers" of modern progress - - the technological avatars of modernity, America and Russia - - the German people, (Heidegger argued in 1935), were fated to fight back against the degraded materialism, philistinism and rootless cosmopolitanism of the twentieth century and shatter the managerial control of technology over the Volk. As the anti-party bent on sweeping away the rotten Weimar system of political compromise in the name of the underlying primordial unity of the people, Heidegger believed that the Nazis were the best hope for leading "the encounter between global technology and modern man." This is what Heidegger means by the infamous phrase "the inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism, left unchanged by him in all subsequent editions of An Introduction to Metaphysics.

Many rubrics of Heidegger's thought passed into the marriage of Marxism and existentialism effected by the Frankfurt School and French thinkers like Kojève and Sartre. They rejected Heidegger's identification of the people's return to Being with fascism, and they retained the proletarian internationalism of the left. But, given the failure of the socio-economic conditions specified by Marx as necessary for a proletarian revolution to materialize in the capitalist heartland of Europe, neo-Marixsts were deeply attracted to Heidegger's expansion of the meaning of alienation from the merely socio-economic to nothing less than an alienation from life, from meaning, from the primordial currents of existence, myth and time. In this view, liberalism becomes the main impediment to a restoration of our disputed mytho-poetic unity with Being. It is no longer the material deprivation of industrial workers that forms the basis for the critique of liberalism, but the spiritual, aesthetic and emotional dissatisfactions of academics, writers, artists and students. The proletariat gives way to the counter-culture as the bearer of the revolutionary mission.

Later on, with Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth (introduced with an admiring preface by Sartre), Heidegger's idea of the people's return to its primordial origins through an act of violent resolve was transferred to a version of third world socialism. Now the left parted with its proletarian internationalism, and instead celebrated the organic wholeness that would flower in a people after a therapeutic act of revolutionary violence shattered the grip of the colonial oppressor (the local agent of global technology).

Heidegger had maintained in 1935 that, from the viewpoint of the German destiny, America and Russia were "metaphysically the same." The notion that liberal democracy, with all its flaws, might nevertheless be preferable to communism - - that one might prefer a regime headed by Franklin Roosevelt to one headed by Stalin - was naive from Heidegger's perspective. All such distinctions were trivialized and swallowed up by the monolithic category of technology, the fundamental and sole reality driving all modern political and social development. This view, too, passed into post-war neo-Marxism. Third world socialism of Fanon's sort shared with the New Left of the Sixties and the peace movement of the Eighties the conviction that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were morally equivalent ("metaphysically the same") and that both systems stood in the way of human peace and happiness. Alleged differences between liberal democratic and Marxist-Leninist regimes paled into insignificance in comparison with global technology's relentless dynamic of exploitation and expansion. In the Heideggerian understanding of technology, which deeply influenced the post-Marxist left in Europe and America, the similarities between Auschwitz and General Motors far outweighed their differences. In their pursuit of maximum efficiency and control, they were distinctions along a continuum rather than different in kind.

Not everyone influenced by Heidegger took this intellectual path. Hannah Arendt, Heidegger's one-time student, was cool toward all such revamped Marxisms. She saw clearly that the Soviet system was in many respects every bit as bad as Nazism, and remained firmly committed to American and western European liberalism as the best hope for combining freedom, dignity and civic life. Although she did draw upon Heideggerian notions of authenticity and risk, she tried to tame existentialism by confining it securely within the boundaries of procedural democracy. She also implicitly repudiated Heidegger's call for the "destruction" of the entire Western tradition of philosophy and culture as hopelessly vitiated by the technological imperative that had reached its culmination in the twentieth century. Like another of Heidegger's students, Hans-Georg Gadamer, she believed that much of modern thought and literature contained possibilities for enriching our personal and civic lives. Life was not, as Heidegger had maintained, a *polemos*. Prudence, balance and compromise were still both possible and desirable. Liberal democracy could be humanized and broadened without being destroyed, in part by drawing upon nobler variations relatively close at hand like Jefferson's ideal of township democracy. Moreover, by arguing that Kant's aesthetic philosophy in the *Critique of Judgment* could form the basis for social ontology that promoted a richer interpersonal life through civic dialogue, Arendt implicitly corrected her teacher's tendency toward draconian extremes, life-and-death alternatives, contempt for all merely conservative traditions, and lack of sympathy for pluralist secular democracies.

Nevertheless, in my view, Arendt never successfully came to terms with the extent to which Heidegger's commitment to Nazism did flow directly from his ontology of Being. In her brief published criticism of Heidegger's politics, she compared his involvement with Nazism to Plato's involvement with Dion of Syracuse. But this comparison obscured much more than it clarified by making it seem as if Heidegger had behaved no differently than Plato. One senses that, by treating Heidegger's temptation to share in the power of a tyrant as part of an identical pattern stretching back to Plato she was avoiding any intrinsic connection between the substance of Heidegger's own distinct philosophy and his activities on behalf of the Third Reich. While her equation of Heidegger with Plato at least provides a starting point for reflecting on the relationship between philosophy and political power, it ignores the differences between Dion and Hitler, on the one hand, and Plato and Heidegger on the other.

Plato believed there was a distinction in principle between tyranny and legitimate authority. His flirtation with Dion was a lapse from principles he otherwise consistently espoused. Moreover, Plato never regarded Dion as the candidate of Being, as Heidegger regarded Hitler. Even when deluded into thinking that a tyrant's heir might be educated to rule wisely, Plato did not regard such politically active men as the embodiment of wisdom. The Good transcends any political authority. For Heidegger, by contrast, since Being is to be found in the primordial origins, the spontaneous event, rather than in the transcendental ends, Hitler's revolutionary violence constituted the "creative violence" and "overpowering presence" of Being itself, shattering the inauthentic conventions of everyday life.

Heidegger's assimilation of all distinctions between better and worse regimes to the single overwhelming process of global technology, combined with his equation of the Nazis' brand of revolutionary populism with the resurgence of Being, made him dismissive of the idea that governments were legitimate only insofar as they respected the rule of law, universalistic human rights and republican institutions. Far from lapsing from standards he otherwise maintained, Heidegger heard in Hitler the voice of Being as such. For Plato, tyranny comes from turning away from the contemplation of the eternal verities and plunging into spontaneity and impulse. For Heidegger, by contrast, the eternal verities are themselves the tyrants, working themselves in our global technology's imperative for imposing a strangle-hold of manageability and orderliness on the spontaneity and impulsiveness of Being. By shattering the bourgeois liberal regime, the Nazis opened the sluiceway for the reason of Being in all its strife, violence, daring and glory.