

Back from Syracuse?

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“Back from Syracuse?”

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Translated by John McCumber

The sensation that Victor Farias' book on Heidegger has created in France is itself astounding. So little appears to be known there about the Third Reich, although the great thinkers are read often and with respect. Heidegger's admirers may have contributed to this to the extent that in defense of Heidegger they played the whole matter down, allowing the impression that after a year of disappointing experiences as the rector of Freiburg, Heidegger had "broken" with National Socialism. What would be meant by that—an open statement, public protest, resigning from the party, or something similar to how such things happen in a society of laws and legality? In the German-speaking lands, almost all of what Farias reports has long been known. His assiduous work in the archives illuminates the bureaucratic procedures of the years after Hitler gained power more than it achieves any basically new point of view. No one in Germany should pretend to be surprised that Heidegger did not "leave" the party (though many people, as a result of Farias' book, are spreading this around as a piece of news).

The younger generation of Germans will also, clearly, not have an easy time imagining how things were with us in those days: the wave of conformism, the pressure, the ideological indoctrination, the unforeseeable sanctions, and so on. It can happen today that one is asked: why did you people not cry out? There is a tendency, above all, to underestimate the universally human inclination to conformism, which continually finds new ways and means for self-deception. The most important of these was: "does the Führer know about that?" This signified an effort to play

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down what was before us, in order not to have to discount it completely. In early 1934, for example, it was still the general expectation in academic circles, and certainly among my Jewish friends, that anti-Semitism was basically a political tactic—obviously a repulsive one, and one the “drummer” (as Hitler was then called) had used viciously enough. In May of that year, Vice-Chancellor Franz von Papen read a speech in Marburg, written by Edgar Jung; in it we saw the hopeful expectation that the revolution was over and we would return to a society of legality.¹

It has been claimed, out of admiration for the great thinker, that his political errors have nothing to do with his philosophy. If only we could be content with that! Wholly unnoticed was how damaging such a “defense” of so important a thinker really is. And how could it be made consistent with the fact that the same man, in the fifties, saw and said things about the industrial revolution and technology that today are still truly astonishing for their foresight?

In any case: no surprise should be expected from those of us who, for fifty years, have reflected on what dismayed us in those days and separated us from Heidegger for many years: no surprise when we hear that in 1933—and for years previous, and for how long after?—he “believed” in Hitler. But Heidegger was also no mere opportunist. If we wish to dignify his political engagement by calling it a political “standpoint,” it would be far better to call it a political “illusion,” which had notably little to do with political reality. If Heidegger later, in the face of all realities, would again dream his dream from those days, the dream of a “people’s religion” [*Volksreligion*], the later version would embrace his deep disappointment over the actual course of affairs. But he continued guarding that dream—and kept silent about it. Earlier, in 1933 and 1934, he thought he was following his dream, and fulfilling his deepest philosophical mission, when he tried to revolutionize the university from the ground up. It was for that that he did everything that horrified us at that time. For him the sole issue was to break the political influence of the church and the tenacity of academic bossdom. Even Ernst Jünger’s

1. For a translation of von Papen’s famous Marburg speech, see Oswald Dutch, *The Errant Diplomat: The Life of Franz von Papen* (London, 1940), pp. 191–209. Jung paid for this speech with his life (p. 215)—TRANS. Dutch gives the date of von Papen’s Marburg speech as 17 June 1934 (p. 191)—ED.

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vision of "the worker" [*der Arbeiter*] was given a place beside his own ideas about overcoming the metaphysical tradition via the reawakening of Being. Later, as is known, Heidegger wandered all the way to his radical talk of the end of philosophy. That was his "revolution."

Because Heidegger in those years expected nothing from a Weimar Republic supported by no public sentiment whatever, and because he received only disappointment from his political experiences, he held back from identifying in any way with political events from then on. So after the end of the Thousand-Year Reich, he saw his vision of the forgetfulness of Being in the epoch of technological totality confirmed. What should he retract? And what if, in the German university with thirty thousand students, he were again to acknowledge anything at all?

People may wonder: did Heidegger feel no responsibility at all for the terrible consequences of Hitler's accession to power—the new barbarism, the Nuremberg laws, the terror, the blood sacrifice for all humanity of two world wars—and, finally, the inextinguishable shame of the extermination camps? The answer is unequivocal: no. All that was merely a ruined revolution and not the great renewal based in the spiritual and moral strength of the people, which Heidegger had dreamed of and yearned for as the preparation for a new human religion.

I get asked whether, after these revelations (which for us are no such thing), one can "still even today" have anything at all to do with the philosophy of this man. "Still even today"? Whoever asks that has much ground to cover. What was received, in Germany and France and everywhere in the world, as a major spiritual renewal was Heidegger's lifelong altercation with the Greeks, with Hegel, and finally with Nietzsche. Did that all become fraudulent? Have we absorbed or gotten beyond it? Or is the real point, perhaps, that people should not think at all, but only follow a completed ideological-political recipe or apply a system of rules worked out by social science? That Heidegger's revolution in the universities failed, and that his involvement in the cultural politics of the Third Reich was a sad story we watched at a distance with anxiety, has led many to think about what Plato came up against in Syracuse. Indeed, after Heidegger resigned from the rectorate, one of his Freiburg friends, seeing him in the streetcar, greeted him: "Back from Syracuse?"

It is unfortunate that Farias' book, in spite of the effort spent on the sources, is wholly superficial and long outdated, even as regards the information it imparts; and that where it touches on philosophical matters it exhibits a grotesque lack of depth and fairly bristles with ignorance.

It is not that easy to get by Heidegger. Even one who lost faith because of Heidegger's political adventures, kept away from him for years, and together with him and others lived through to the end the increasingly dark future of their common country—even such a person could never dream of denying the philosophical impetus he received early on from Heidegger, an impulse often renewed later. Since Heidegger,

in the twenties, assembled no flock of blind followers, it was all the more necessary for one to find one's own way. In this, some of what one did may have found some approval from him, such as my hermeneutical philosophy or my little book on Paul Celan, *Wer bin ich und wer bist Du?*² But Heidegger certainly stayed true to himself to such a degree that he was not to find, in this case, a genuine development of the approaches he had indicated. Possibly he thought himself better understood in France. But in Germany Heidegger himself had experienced too much of the fascination he aroused, and which took the form of mere imitation, for him to refuse credit to such as me.

Whoever thinks we can here and now dispense with Heidegger has not begun to fathom how difficult it was and remains for anyone *not* to dispense with him, as opposed to making a fool of oneself with supercilious gestures.

2. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wer bin ich und wer bist Du? Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celans Gedichfolge "Atemkristall"* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), trans. into French by Elsie Poulain, under the title *Qui suis-je et qui es-tu?* (Arles, 1987).